Forever Is Composed Of Nows
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Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death

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Forever Is Composed Of Nows

by Bre, So_Caffeinated (so_caffeinated)

Summary

Sometime in the not-so-distant future, things aren't going all that well. At least that's the story Oliver and Felicity are told when a supposed time-traveler (and their supposed friend who is a supposed superhero supposedly named The Flash) pops up in the lair with a toddler in tow... who calls them momma and daddy. The Flash can't quite control when he's going at this point and there's a big bad chasing him through the years. The future isn't safe for little Elizabeth Queen at the moment (even if The Flash could get her there), but her once and future parents haven't got a clue what to do with her. Slade Wilson, however... he might have his own agenda when he finds out his nemesis is apparently a father.

Notes

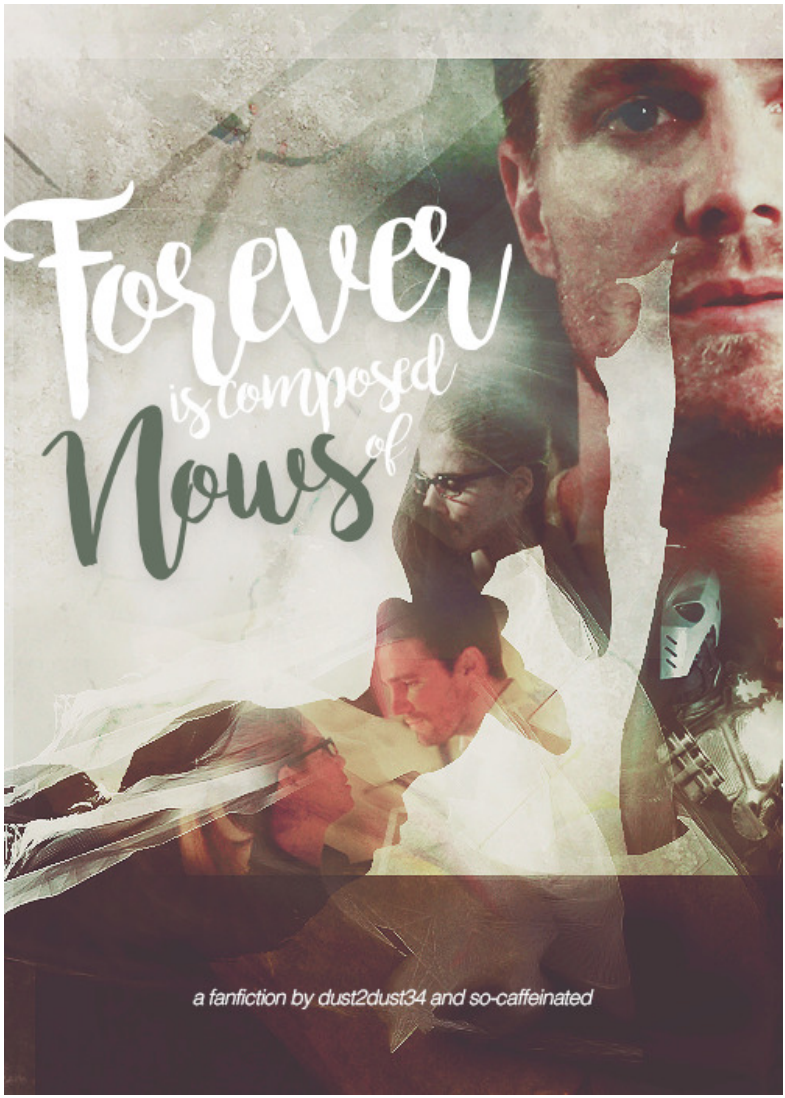
Prompt - Oliver and Felicity toddler from the future gets sent back in time for some reason or another (ohh a bad guy kidnapped her/him and sent her/him there) and past Oliver and Felicity has to keep her/him safe until their future selves can come get her/him (or Uncle Barry). Meanwhile in the future, oliver and felicity with team arrow have to figure out who and where and when, to save their kid...

A/N - Very shortly after the Olicity Fic Big Bang was conceived, Janis (@so-caffeinated) messaged Bre (@dust2dust34) and was like “Heeeeey, wanna cowrite a thing for that?” Luckily, Bre thought this was a most excellent idea and this fic was born. Nearly five months later, we’re super excited to share it with you! It’s not done yet, but we’re about a hundred pages in and going strong. You can expect weekly updates until it’s complete.

Now, back when we started this fic in September (with the doc labelled “Elizabeth Queen - Time Travelling Toddler (this is definitely not the title),” we named our girl Ellie for a couple of reasons… some of which will be covered in the fic. Since that time, there’s been another author (nikkibeckettcsm/CSM) who created a pretty great fic (Against All Odds) with a time travelling daughter of Oliver and Felicity named Ellie Queen. If we hadn’t

been 80 pages in, we probably would have changed our girl's name. But after months of writing her already, it was just too ingrained in the story. Chalk it up to great minds thinking alike… and definitely go read her fic too (which is absolutely completely different and not connected in any way, but still totally worth your time).

Credit to the best beta ever, @alizziebyanyothername, and our fantastic cheerleader @jsevick. You ladies are awesome! Without further adieu, we give you Forever Is Composed of Nows (credit to Emily Dickinson for the quote).



Banner by Sarah (cherrychapssstick)

Chapter 1

Chapter One

It's sort of incredible how much Isabel's voice grates at her nerves.

Felicity hadn't realized exactly how much until the news broadcast was turned off and Queen Consolidated's obnoxious public face was silenced, at least temporarily. Isabel makes her twitch, muscles in her face and shoulders flinching involuntarily. Felicity's not naive enough to think that Oliver, John *or* Sara miss that lovely little reaction, but they don't have time to focus on her utter loathing of Isabel right now.

They've got much bigger problems.

Her hair smells like smoke and C4 and she's wondering how exactly she can add today's events to her resume. Demolition experience? Too obvious and way too illegal sounding. What if someone actually asks her about it? "*It was totally legal, I was… legally blowing a building up...*" Corporate restructuring expert? That could work. She should come up with something. She's pretty sure she's about to be out of a job with Isabel in charge and even if she's *not*, she's not sure she can knowingly work for a supervillain. Especially one that makes her face twitch. That's all she needs, Isabel thinking she's winking at her.

But even *that* takes a back seat to Slade's plans for the city, his plans for Oliver.

"Since Applied Sciences went kaboom," Felicity notes, thinking out loud. "He can't use our technology - well, *formerly* ours - for his warped science experiments."

"Slade's had us on our heels for weeks," Digg says. "It's about time we took the fight to him."

"All that'll do is set him back," Oliver says. "We have no way of knowing where the next attack is coming from."

There's got to be a way to anticipate what Slade's next move is, like some algorithm she can write or predictive programing she can apply. This is *her* wheelhouse. It's why she's here, right? She might not shoot a bow and arrow or fire a gun, but she can outthink nearly anyone, darn it. There has to be something she can do.

"What if we..." she starts, but the words die on her lips as a sharp whir of noise and a streak of red bursts into the room.

She's not even done *blinking* before Oliver's standing in front of her, crowding her backwards as everyone else instantly draws their weapons, echoing surprised shouts and graphic variations of 'What the hell?'

Felicity catches a glimpse of red before it flitters away when weapons point its direction.

"Whoa, hey! Not a threat! Not a threat!" a vaguely familiar man's voice protests, followed by a small whimper.

The sound makes Felicity pause for a second and she almost moves around Oliver to see what it is before common sense kicks in.

"Come out *now*," Sara says, taking a step towards the blur's hiding place.

"Totally come in peace, guys, I swear," the voice says again, sounding more and more familiar.

A red gloved hand appears, like a white flag, wiggling.

"Come out," Sara repeats and it - he? - slowly does.

"Who the hell are you?" Oliver demands, one hand in a tight fist, the other keeping Felicity secure behind him. "How did you..." He pauses, and she can hear the wheels in his head turning just as quickly as hers because *what the heck is going on?* Since when was moving that fast a *thing?* Oliver hesitates before asking again, "Who are you?"

"Oh… *wow*, is this the *old* lair? Man, I forgot how small this place was," the newcomer says.

Felicity tries to peek around Oliver's formidable frame. His grip on her arm tightens, but she's not having it. She's pretty sure they'd all be dead if this... *whatever* wanted that. He did just swoop in in the literal blink of an eye, all red and *flashy,* and wow, like their lives weren't weird enough?

The glimpse of the newcomer she does manage might almost be comical if it weren't for the circumstances.

The man is dressed head-to-toe in some sort of skin-tight red suit. And

she *does* mean skin-tight. If it were bedazzled, she might mistake him for an ice skater. But that's somehow not the most surprising thing. No, the most surprising thing is that he's holding a small child protectively against his chest, shielding the little girl from the various weapons pointed at them and cupping the back of her head so her face is buried in his shoulder.

The whimpers are coming from her.

Felicity's heart lurches at the realization.

Oliver's eyes are glued to the mass of blonde curls tucked up against the stranger, and Felicity can feel the hesitation in his touch. He can't quite seem to decide if he should lower his guard, if he should actually *trust* this... guy. Neither can John or Sara, for that matter. There's an intruder, yes, and that's dangerous in and of itself, but he hasn't made any threatening moves at all. In fact, all he's done is declare himself friendly... and protect a child.

Felicity grips Oliver's arm and peeks around him again, and this time he doesn't stop her.

"When am I?" the man in the red suit asks.

"I'm sorry, *what*?" Sara blinks at him.

"2013 or 2014. Am I right?" he asks, sounding like he really wants them to tell him he's wrong. When nobody speaks up, he sighs. "This isn't what I intended. At all. But... I guess it could be worse."

"How about less questions and more answers," Oliver says, his muscles coiling. "Who the hell are you? *What* are you? How did you get in here? How did you find this place?"

"Just… before I explain, I've gotta ask... Did they turn on the particle accelerator yet?"

"What does that-" Digg starts.

"Yes," Oliver interrupts.

"Good. You already know me then. I'm from the future," the man tells them and Digg immediately scoffs. "The accident with the particle accelerator did something to me. I run fast - really, *really* fast. Fast enough to travel through time actually."

Felicity blinks. "*What?*"

Her eyes fly to Oliver. He's frowning, and she can see the wheels turning in his head as he tries to make sense of what he's hearing, but then it quickly morphs into shocked surprise and she turns to find the man in red has removed his mask.

"*Barry*?" Felicity breathes, barely audible.

He's older, by at least a few years, and he's more *built*, like he really had grown a bit, but he's got the same hair, the same nervous smile when he knows what he's saying or doing is completely *ridiculous*, the same eyes… it's definitely him.

For once in her life, Felicity is stunned speechless.

"That… is not possible," Digg says, his jaw practically on the floor. He looks at Felicity, like he's waiting for her to agree with him.

"Well… actually…" she replies, voice trailing off as she thinks about it.

Because, *yeah*, theoretically…

"You've *got* to be kidding me," Digg snaps. "*Time travel*? That's ridiculous."

"So's a World War Two era super soldier serum that basically makes you invincible," Sara points out.

"But *time travel?"* Digg protests, his voice rising as he waves at Barry.

"Uh, do you guys mind toning it down a bit?" Barry asks, rocking the whimpering girl in his arms a little. The sound has Felicity moving without even realizing it, but Oliver stops her. "You're kind of scaring her and she's had a rough day as it is."

Felicity puts her hand on Oliver's forearm with a quiet, "It's okay." He looks down at her, their eyes meeting. His brow furrowing before he relents, relaxing his stance, letting her step out.

"Why are you here?" Oliver asks, his voice edged. "What time are you from exactly and…" His eyes focus on the blonde curls again. "Who is she?"

"*What time are you from exactly…"*

Not for the first time, Felicity wonders what exactly he saw in his

years away… or rather, *their* years away - everyone else in the room looks like they've been sucker punched, while Sara and Oliver are acting like this is just another day that ends in y.

"It's complicated," Barry tells them. "I had to get Ellie out of a bad situation. It's not safe for her in our time right now, and I don't have the kind of control I usually do over where I end up. There's this other speedster and he's…" He struggles, looking for the right words. "He's messing with the Speed Force. I can't control when I go or where I end up until I defeat him. Which means I can't get her home until he's gone, so…"

"Whoa, wait… you want to leave her *here*?" Felicity asks, finding her voice again and speaking up as she puts the pieces together. "With us?"

The little girl pokes her head up at Felicity's voice and turns to look at her. Big, watery blue eyes widen when the toddler sees her, and Felicity's heart does that lurchy thing again when she sees the terror all over the little girl's face. Her eyes are puffy and wet from crying, her hair in tangles. She has a scratch on her cheek, like she tripped at some point, and her clothes are smudged with dirt.

"I need to," Barry says, and then he pauses, his eyes glazing with sympathy. "*You* told me to, Felicity."

Oliver frowns with a, "She did?" just as Felicity asks, "I what?"

"Momma?" the toddler asks, her voice trembling, and then she reaches for Felicity.

"What?" Oliver breathes as Felicity jerks like she's been electrocuted.

"Uh… what? No. I mean..." She blinks, shaking her head. "That's not… I mean… Wait… What?"

She feels Oliver's gaze like an actual weight being shoved against the side of her head, but she doesn't dare turn to look at him. She can't. She's frozen and completely unable to process anything past the desperate, "*Momma?"* she'd just heard…

Momma?

The little girl lunges forward - *towards Felicity* - and if it weren't for Barry's lightning-quick reaction time, he probably would have dropped her. She's scared, that much is obvious, and the more Barry

tries to keep her still, the more urgent her sobbing becomes as she reaches desperately in Felicity's direction, her chubby, freckled cheeks wet with tears, her pouty lips quivering. It stirs some primal instinct in Felicity that she didn't know she even had - part of her wants to take the girl, hold her and calm her down, but the larger and far more dominant part of her is still frozen in shock.

"I want my momma," Ellie sobs, squirming and reaching for her.

Felicity just gapes at them, still frozen, because *what?*

"Uh, Felicity…" Barry starts, struggling to hold her.

"Felicity, just take her," Oliver says.

She turns wide urgent eyes to him, moving to shake her head but he levels her with a look, a look that says, '*I know. I know this scary and we have no idea what is going on, but we'll figure it out. I swear*.' Does he even realize what he's asking? And yet the calm reassurance warming his eyes loosens the tight band that has been systematically wrapping around her ribs, and she takes a quick breath... because apparently she was holding her breath. Like he can see it too, he gives her a short nod before his eyes slide back to the little girl - *to Ellie*.

His face shutters as he stares at her. "I don't think she'll calm down until you do."

She can't read his tone, and she really doesn't want to because he's staring at *her child.* From the *future*. It's *freaky*.

"Right," Felicity whispers, nodding and then she turns to take the struggling child from Barry's arms.

Ellie practically leaps into her arms.

"Hey, it's okay, you're okay," Felicity says automatically as the toddler wraps her arms around her neck. "I've got you. You're okay."

The little girl buries her face in her shoulder, her breathing instantly evening out as she calms down, huffing out little puffs of air against the crook of Felicity's neck. As Felicity readjusts her closer, Ellie takes a deep, shaky breath before relaxing against her completely.

It settles something in Felicity too, much to her ever-growing surprise.

It actually feels *natural*, which is just downright *crazy*.

Heart in her throat, Felicity smooths a hand down Ellie's head and back, earning her a little sigh. And before she knows what she's doing, she holds the little girl tighter, cradles her closer, and she knows with a vivid certainty that she can't let anything happen to this child.

She won't.

"It's not safe for her here," Felicity says to Barry. "Slade's out to destroy the city and we have no idea where he's going to strike next."

She glances at Oliver for backup but he's staring at Ellie still, a strange look on his face, one she can't read. She frowns at him - is it *that* strange that she has a kid? He looks like someone told him they were going to surgically remove his lungs.

A thought strikes her and she swings back to Barry.

"Unless you know? About Slade, what he's planning… Can you help us? You know what happens, right? You have to."

"Oh no, no, no, I'm already disrupting the timeline way more than I should," Barry says. "I didn't have any choice in bringing her here, but it would be a really bad idea for me to intentionally change anything else. Trust me, I had to learn that the hard way."

Felicity stares at him, the pain in his tone telling her everything she needs to know. She hasn't known Barry that long - she even thought that maybe there was a spark there, something that...

Oh.

Oh.

Was *Barry* the father? Was that why he'd brought her back, was that...?

The thought shoots through her before she can fully process how stupid it is - he certainly isn't *acting* like the little girl's father and he'd barely been able to keep her in his arms, like he didn't know what he was doing…

Still, Felicity almost takes a step back, away from him, because it can't be right.

It's a logical assumption, yes, one that might make sense somewhere, *maybe,* but the way her gut is twisting tells her no.

She's just staring at Barry and judging by the way he's frowning at her in confusion, he doesn't like it.

Oliver steps up, severing the connection.

"Take her to someone else then," he says, the edge in his voice making Ellie flinch. Felicity almost whirls on him and tells him to watch his tone when he says, "Somewhere else, maybe, where she won't be in danger. To her... to her father, maybe."

Oliver's eyes dart to her a split second, that *look* back.

"Oliver, man..." Barry says with a sheepish look, staring at him like just his name was supposed to tell him everything he needed to know. When Oliver just stares at him uncomprehendingly, Barry drags his hand through his mop of hair with a deep breath. "I kinda already did."

The entire foundry goes strangely still.

"I… beg your pardon?" Felicity snaps, her hand freezing where it'd been stroking Ellie's back. The little girl shifts in her arms, like she can *feel* Felicity's discord and she doesn't like it.

She absently realizes how strange it is that she's already slipped into thinking of her as *Ellie,* instead of a random child from the future who her crazy future friend just told her was...

No way.

"Her name is Elizabeth Queen," Barry tells them. "And you both asked me to bring her back so the two of you in this time could keep her safe."

Oliver blanches. You can actually *see* his stomach plummeting as he freezes, just... blinking.

No.

No way.

"I'm like... ninety percent sure I heard you wrong and ten percent sure I'm hallucinating right now," Felicity breathes, nodding swiftly, trying to control the sudden rapid staccato beat of her heart as it pushes way too much adrenaline-filled blood through her system. She swallows, barely aware she's starting to hold Ellie too tightly. "Make that more

like 70/30, actually. And I'm not... positive that one precludes the other."

"Ow, momma," Ellie says, pulling back and Felicity instantly relaxes her hold, naturally curving herself around the little girl, almost like it's something she does every day.

Everyone stares at her.

"Wow… that's actually..." Sara says with a derisive laugh. "Right, of course."

Felicity can't look at any of them.

Not at Oliver standing stock still, not even blinking as he stares at Barry, or at Digg raising his eyebrows and grinning in a stupidly wide fashion, or at Sara shaking her head and staring at the two of them… *the three of them*.

Oh... frak.

Instead, she tucks her head down and kisses the top of the little girl's head absently, breathing in her unfamiliar scent, stroking a hand comfortingly up Ellie's back.

She can't think. She can't even *think* about the tiny possibility that this is true. Because, that would mean...

With Oliver.

"Oh wow," she whispers into Ellie's hair.

"That's not…" Oliver finally starts, his voice cracking. He stops himself and swallows, looking a little pale. "I mean... we aren't… like that."

You don't freaking say?

"Oh, *believe me*, I know," Barry confirms. "I get a whole speech about that, like, a year from now or so." He changes the timbre of his voice mockingly. "'Guys like us don't get the girl.' I enjoyed making you eat those words later."

Oliver looks like he literally can't find any words to respond to that.

Guys like us don't get the girl.

It's apparently literally an entire year away and already she wants to

smack Oliver for even *thinking* that. But thinking what? They aren't like *that*. They'll never be like *that*, that's just... *ridiculous*. Unthinkable.

Right?

As if she'd asked the question out loud, Oliver looks over just as she looks at him and they freeze. It's like time takes a break, everything around them stopping. His hands are shoved in his pockets, his shoulders hunched, as if he's going to make a break for it the first chance he gets.

"Oliver," she whispers, just for his ears, and he starts at the same time that Ellie pulls her head out of Felicity's shoulder.

The little girl's eyes latch onto Oliver and... she *smiles*.

In that instant, they both know it's true.

Oliver makes a noise very close to a choking sound as Ellie whispers, "Hi, daddy."

Felicity's chest tightens to the point of pain and she takes a shaky breath because… *this*, this is right, and every inch of her knows it. Which is *insane* because it's *Oliver* and the thought of anything past him touching her arm or shoulder - or her cheek that one time, but she'd just gotten *shot* saving Sara, so... special circumstances - is completely out of the realm of possibility.

And yet...

A beatific smile ghosts over his lips for a split second, a smile she's never seen before as he instinctively opens his mouth to respond, but then it's gone in the next second as he stops himself, a slash of pain and reticence flashing over his face as he realizes what he was about to do.

Felicity can't read his face or the emotions swirling in his eyes, and she suddenly doesn't want to because the way he abruptly shifts away from them...

He looks like he wants to be anywhere else but there.

With her.

And their child.

His eyes meet hers and she knows the sorrow staring back at her is a

reflection of her expression.

Amazingly, it's Sara who saves them both from having to say anything.

"Look, Slade Wilson is out to destroy the city and anyone connected to Oliver specifically," Sara points out. "It's not safe for her here. If he finds out that Oliver has a daughter..."

"I know that, but Zoom is after her *throughout* time," Barry tells them. "It's not safe for her anywhere, but she stands a better chance here with you now than she does in the future, or with me while Zoom and I chase each other through history. You *have* to protect her." His eyes land on Felicity and then Oliver, where they stay. "You cannot even begin to imagine what she means to all of you."

He's right. Felicity can't even begin to understand *how* she knows he's right, but breathing in the scent of *her child* and feeling the little girl cling to her, calming down from her presence alone…

Well, she's got an inkling of an idea, anyhow.

"When will..." Sara starts, but Barry suddenly stiffens, like he hears something only he can.

"I'm sorry," Barry says, backing up. "I'm so sorry, but I've been here too long already. He's gonna find me. And if he finds *me* then he finds *her*, and I can't let that happen."

He's leaving.

He's leaving.

A spike of panic slices through Felicity's chest because he really is leaving this little girl in their care and what the hell is she supposed to do with that? She has no idea how to take care of a child in the best of circumstances but now, with the ever-present danger of Slade and the newly bestowed title of 'mommy' thrust upon her… it's positively *daunting*.

She takes a quick step towards him, the words, "But you can't..." about to come out when Barry levels a steady look at her.

"I'll be back." His eyes slide to Oliver and then back to her. "I promise."

And then with a blur of red and a gust of air, he's gone, leaving Ellie

burrowed in Felicity's arms and Oliver staring at the spot Barry had been standing, his muscles slowly bunching, starting to look more and more like a cornered animal than an actual human.

He doesn't look at her or Ellie.

"Okay then…" Digg says, sounding entirely too amused considering a man had just *appeared* - literally running through *time* and making a quick pitstop in the foundry, like he'd just stopped in for coffee - and deposited a tiny human in Felicity's arms before running right back out. "This has been an interesting afternoon."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Holy cow, you guys! Your response to this has completely blown our socks off. Or would have, were we wearing socks. But really. We're just both like "are you seeing this??" to each other on repeat. THANK YOU! Updates will be Mondays from here on out, but we couldn't resist giving you another chapter today. ENJOY!

"So," Sara says, looking between Oliver and Felicity, unable to keep the smile off her lips. "Sounds like congratulations are in order."

Oliver nails her with a hard glare.

"That's not funny," he says, taking a deep breath as he scrubs his hands over his face. The air feels like it's on fire as it slips down his throat into his lungs, slowly suffocating him.

"It's kinda funny," Sara replies. He grits his teeth at the grin in her voice and she puts her hands up in surrender, making him frown.

She's teasing him. She's teasing him about the fact that he has a daughter with Felicity - a *relationship* with Felicity - in the future… meaning they are clearly not together anymore.

Oliver's never had any illusions about his relationship with Sara. They're not the 'forever' sort of couple, and frankly, that had always been part of her appeal. She understood the life he lived and she didn't hold on to expectations for some picturesque future together that he could never have… at least a future he'd *thought* he couldn't have, with her, with anyone. And while they hadn't really talked about it, he's almost positive she feels the same way about him.

But still, this has to be an incredibly awkward experience for his girlfriend… if she is, in fact, still his girlfriend after everything that's happened in the last five minutes.

Despite all of that, it is still much, much easier to look at her than at Felicity... and the little girl she's holding.

The little girl that's *his*.

They have a daughter.

Together.

They get together - they *sleep* together - at some point in the future and have a *daughter*.

He can't even begin to fathom how any of that is *possible* past the fact that they do have a child together, a child who is in grave danger, who was literally carried through time to escape whatever mortal threat she was facing from wherever - *whenever* - she came from, a danger she's facing likely because she's their daughter, because she's *his* daughter.

His chest is growing too tight, making his throat squeeze and his teeth ache.

"*Hi, Daddy."*

He feels sick.

"We'll figure it out, Ollie," Sara says, her voice softening and it does *nothing* to help because Ellie's here and... *his*.

Theirs.

"What *are* we going to do?" Felicity asks and just the sound of her voice makes the ache worse. "She can't stay here."

"I know," Oliver says… but that's all he's got. He glances at Felicity, and the uncertainty and fear in her eyes almost has him moving to her again, touching her, whispering a quiet, *"It'll be okay,"* but he doesn't do any of that. Because he doesn't know if that's true, and because Ellie's blonde head is on the shoulder he usually goes for.

Does he do that? Has he always favored a shoulder?

What the hell is he thinking?

"Momma?" Ellie asks, her little voice soft and musical, and it tugs at something in him, something he desperately wants to go away.

How could he have been so reckless, having a child? What happens in the future?

God, he doesn't even know what *time* she's from.

Ellie pulls her head up and looks around, gnawing on her bottom lip. It absolutely does not escape his attention that Felicity holds her a little tighter, naturally moving to adjust herself in relation to the little girl - to *their daughter*.

He feels like he's been punched in the gut.

Are they together in the future? Did they just have Ellie or does she have siblings? Are they *married*? Is he still the Arrow at night?

Are they happy?

Or was the little girl an accident, something that just happened?

Unbidden, an image of Felicity carrying Ellie comes to mind - they're in sundresses and they're both grinning, their sun-kissed hair windblown in matching disarray… he knows without a single doubt that they have the same smile. He sees her chasing Ellie around a park, their giggles echoing around them... he sees Felicity with Ellie as a baby, carrying her around in one of those wrap things, cradled close to her chest as she walks through a department store, looking at curtains of all the stupid things his mind could conjure up... and then he sees her, lying on her side in a bed of white sheets, her hand on her swollen belly, looking so perfectly serene...

Glowing.

Felicity would be an amazing mom.

He's nowhere in these images, and his chest hollows out.

How could he do this to her?

"Where are we?" Ellie asks.

"Uh, well... we are in a place, a place that..." Felicity replies, searching for what she should say. She looks to him, but he's got nothing, and nobody steps up to help. Oliver notes the still-present smile on Sara's lips and the way Diggle is fighting his own grin at Felicity's non-answer. "A-a place called the... Arrow Cave. Not the Arrow, like the Arrow-Arrow, but a... it's a cave. With... arrows."

"A cave?" Ellie repeats, looking around, her little brow furrowed. "Where are the rocks then?"

Oliver expects Felicity to blurt something else out but instead she smiles, her entire face transforming as she cocks her head, assessing Ellie in a new light, and it's another punch to the gut.

"You are one smart little girl," Felicity says. "This is a different sort of cave."

"Does daddy swim with mermaids in this cave too?" she asks and Felicity's eyes widen as Oliver's stomach drops.

"Uh... mermaids?" Felicity looks to him but he's just staring at Ellie, his mind blank. "Who told you he swam with mermaids?"

"Daddy did. Remember? When we went to Hawaii."

Ellie butchers the hell out of 'Hawaii' but it's enough to make his heart squeeze at the thought of him going somewhere like *Hawaii…* with a family. *His* family. He goes to an *island* for vacation?

"We went into that cave and there were rocks and water and daddy said he used to swim with mermaids a long time ago. He said they were his friends and that one was really pretty. Her name was Shado, because she was small and sneaky, and there was one called Sara who was like sunshine."

Oliver's eyes fly to Sara just as hers seek him. Her eyebrows quirk with amusement as she mouths, 'Sunshine?'

He can feel his face turning red.

The only thing Felicity can manage is a soft, "Oh."

Is she talking about the island? Did he tell his daughter about the horrors he faced on Lian Yu? Did he actually cover them up by talking about *mermaids*?

Oliver's head is spinning. He tries to find words, tries to say something, tries to get back on track, but nothing comes.

He can't breathe.

Silence reigns, but it appears Ellie isn't one for quiet. She's settled more, looking lively and active, the tear tracks on her face fading as she looks around again before focusing on Oliver.

"Where are the mermaids, daddy?" His insides twists as she looks at him with beautiful blue eyes, still a little shiny from her tears. "They

need water, they're like fish." She points at a wall, asking him, "Is the ocean outside, is that where they are?"

He doesn't answer. He can't feel anything as everyone - including his *daughter* and her *mother* - look at him expectantly.

"Oliver," Felicity prods and it jolts him like he's been shot.

"Uh... no," he says, unwittingly taking a few steps back and jamming his hands in his pockets. "There aren't any mermaids in this cave."

Ellie's mouth twists in consternation before furrowing her brow at him. "Daddy, do you need to cry?"

Everyone's jaws drop.

"Wh... what?" Oliver whispers.

"You look sad. You told me sometimes grownups have to cry when they're sad and then they're better."

Nobody says a word, all eyes on him, and Oliver desperately wants to go back to a few minutes ago when dealing with Slade was their biggest problem. That suddenly seems really *manageable* compared to this.

Slade.

Even if she is his daughter from the future, that doesn't change the fact that their lives are in grave danger right now, that they are still too far behind Slade, completely unaware of what his plans are.

They have to stop him.

"I'm not sad," Oliver says dismissively, his tone making Ellie pout with disbelief. Felicity frowns too but he ignores her, turning to face Digg and Sara. "We need to find a place to hide her and get back on track. Just because we closed one door doesn't mean he won't find another one."

"And where exactly do you plan on taking her, Oliver?" Digg asks, raising his eyebrows. "It's not like we have a babysitter on retainer."

"Can I go to Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea's?" Ellie asks and everyone freezes *again*, all eyes swinging back to her. She turns a giant grin on Felicity. "He lets me eat ice cream. He gave it to me in a big waffle cone, but the waffle cone broke and some of it got on the floor and he

told me not to tell you or Aunt Thea."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Sara says, chuckling quietly as Oliver glares at her again. She bites her lip to keep from smiling, but her eyes are still alight with humor.

"You can't go to Uncle Roy's, sweetie," Felicity says, making a face as she whispers, "And considering everything that's going on, that's the strangest thing I've ever said... We're gonna go somewhere else, somewhere… else, which we'll figure out. Soon. Like now," she finishes, sending a meaningful look at everyone, but the options are more than slim.

"I can stay here, momma," Ellie says. "I'll be good."

Felicity's eyes widen but Sara beats her to it.

"I don't think that's a good idea, munchkin," Sara replies.

Ellie looks at her, a little line appearing between her brows - and for a split second, she looks just like Thea. The resemblance is so uncanny that it takes Oliver's breath away.

Sara looks at him. "Maybe we could take her to Laurel. She could find a safe place for her."

"That'll be a fun conversation," Felicity says. "'Hey, Laurel, can you watch my child that I supposedly will have with my ex-EA? Oh, and the whole 'will have' thing is the best part: she's from the future! Crazy, right?' I mean… this is something you read in trashy magazines, not *real life*. Or, *her* real life, at least, because it is *our* real life. Or whatever." Felicity looks at Ellie. "Well, it will be our life." She looks at Oliver. "I guess."

Oliver can feel her eyes on him but he just closes his, mostly so he doesn't look at her - he really can't deal with this right now - but also because she has a point. Laurel isn't an idiot, she'd take one look at Ellie and see the likeness, and not just on his side. Just looking at her in Felicity's arms, you can tell they're related. The longer Oliver stares at them, the more they start to look like twins. Ellie's a miniature version of her with a few bits of him thrown in.

His chest clenches, the thought warming him before he can stop it - something dangerous unfurls in his gut and he feels the strangest *pull* - to *them*. To *her*.

It's a pull he's been avoiding for months now.

No.

"We don't have time for this," Oliver says abruptly and he avoids the sharp look Felicity sends him. "We have to find a place to put her so we can take care of Slade. He can't know that she exists, much less that she's here. If she's really my... if she's our..."

He can't even say the *word*.

Oliver sighs, bowing his head. "Let's just… let's just figure this out. I know Slade, and he won't stop until he gets what he wants."

Before anyone can respond, Ellie wiggles in Felicity's arms. "I want down, momma."

"Oh, well... Okay, I guess, but..." Felicity looks like she isn't quite sure what to do with her as Ellie struggles. She slowly sets her down, but she grabs her hand, not letting her go. "Don't go anywhere weird. Or far. Or... anywhere, actually. Just stay here, can you stay here for me?"

"Yes," Ellie replies in exasperation.

Felicity's eyes widen and Diggle snickers.

"Okay then," Felicity says, letting her go.

But Ellie doesn't go far

She makes a direct beeline to Oliver.

He freezes. He hears Felicity's sharp intake, sees her take a step towards them like she's about to warn Ellie off… but she stops short, just watching.

Ellie lifts her arms up to him with a simple, "Hug."

Oliver doesn't move.

"What?" he says, the word barely audible.

"Daddy, hug." Ellie wiggles her hands in a different kind of exasperation - it's more patient, like she was expecting this, like he was always this *difficult* - as she says, "You're sad. You got Sad Eyes, like when momma was sleeping after that bad man got in her room.

You need a hug."

Her words slam into him like a cannonball and his eyes fly to Felicity, his lungs clamping shut.

Something happens to her? What bad man? What happened? Was she okay?

The questions are on the tip of his tongue but the look on Felicity's face stops him. She's looking at Ellie with a peculiar look; there isn't any fear or concern about what their daughter just said. Instead, it's almost... wistful.

Her eyes slip up to his and he sees it's hitting her just as hard as it is him.

This is their daughter.

They have a *daughter*.

Ellie steps forward and grabs his wrists, her touch making him jump. She tugs his hands out of his pockets, determination twisting her little face as she says, "Momma's okay, daddy, you don't need to be sad anymore."

Oliver's moving before he knows it - he doesn't know if it's a response to her tone, a reaction to her touch making him feel like he's a hundred pounds lighter, or to the look on Felicity's face, but in the next second he's kneeling down before her.

He's tentative though, not sure how he should...

Ellie immediately jumps into his arms.

Oliver catches her, his eyes slamming shut, barely feeling her slight weight as she wraps herself around him. She's so tiny, so frail in his arms... and yet he feels like she could carry him for miles. Strength radiates from her, encompassing him, and his eyes burn with tears because in that moment, it's *real*.

She's his.

Oliver slowly hugs her, cradling her against his chest, turning his face into her hair, breathing her in. It's an unfamiliar mixture of strawberry shampoo, something sharp and tangy like battery acid, the smell of a home-cooked meal and *her*.

His daughter.

Ellie hugs him as tight as she can, pushing her face into his shoulder with a whispered, "Do you feel better, daddy?"

Something in his chest breaks as something else heals, and he nods, an unsteady smile on his lips.

"I do feel better," he replies, his voice rough. And he does. "Thank you."

He sees Felicity shifting out the corner of his eye and he looks up to see her lips pressed together tightly, her eyes wet... and time stops.

This is his future and for that split second, he *believes* this really will happen - he wants it so badly it burns.

"Well, isn't this the lovely picture?"

The thick Australian accent echoes through the room, almost like it's coming from everywhere at once, from all around them, and Oliver's blood freezes, a crazed panic seizing his heart.

"How sweet."

He found them.

Oliver moves faster than he ever has in his life. One second he's holding Ellie and the next he's swinging her out of his embrace behind him, her startled squeak fading into an ugly rush of white noise in his head as he pushes her back so she's underneath the med table.

"Get in and don't move," he snaps.

She instantly obeys, the sound of her clapping her hand over her mouth and a soft sniffle ripping him in half - she's had to do this before.

His eyes fly wildly for Felicity but she's already at his side, grabbing his wrist in a tight grip as they stand side-by-side - *together*, despite how much he wants to shove her in there with Ellie - as Slade steps out of the shadows.

John and Sara trade sharp whispers as they arm themselves, but Slade only has an eye for Oliver.

He's in a full suit, one Oliver's only seen pictures of through ARGUS -

the most startling is his mask, so shockingly reminiscent of the one he'd worn on Lian Yu he wants to vomit.

There's only one slot for his eye.

"This is a precarious place for a child, Oliver," Slade drawls. "You never know what kind of dangers might appear."

Oliver doesn't answer. Instead he angles his head to Felicity and whispers, "When we attack, take Ellie and run."

"I'm not... I can't leave you, Oliver," she says under her breath. "What if-"

Oliver tugs the wrist she's holding behind his back as he steps closer to her, twisting his hand until he's clasping hers. He clutches her fingers tightly with a quietly desperate, "I won't be able to do this wondering if you're both okay, Felicity. Please."

She's holding his hand just as tightly, and he can't tell which one of them is trembling. She exhales, and he can feel her fighting the instinct to stay and fight, for him, for her family. He feels a stab of pride - this is one of the things he loves about her, her strength, her courage.

Oliver squeezes her hand.

Felicity finally gives him a tiny nod, not missing the fear-riddled, "Oliver..." she breathes.

It all happens in the space of a few seconds.

Oliver's eyes are on Slade and they narrow when he lets out a low, dark chuckle... before they widen in alarm when he sees the gun.

"Felicity, go," he growls, shoving her behind him.

Slade starts firing.

They dive for cover, bullets ricocheting around them, the gunfire deafening in a way it never has been before. Now it's emphasized to the point of real terror, a terror he's never felt in his life, because he catches the sound of Ellie's startled shriek on the edge of the emptying clip, Slade following Sara where she darts across the foundry.

"Go!" Oliver shouts at Felicity as Diggle reaches the lights, immediately switching them off, leaving nothing but dull green

emergency lights, casting everything in a garish tone.

Slade drops the gun, but Oliver's attention is focused only on the scuttle of Felicity's heels as she dives under the med table with a harried, "Come on, sweetie, come on," just as Sara shoots up from her hiding spot, yanking the metal bar off the salmon ladder before launching herself at Slade with a vicious cry.

Oliver hears Felicity grabbing Ellie, hears his daughter's broken, "Momma!" and he almost turns to make sure she's okay when he sees Slade catch Sara midair, his hand wrapped around her throat, stopping her momentum so abruptly Oliver fears he's snapped her neck.

Sara grapples at Slade's grip, scrabbling for air under his monstrous hold. He grates out an ugly, "Hello, Sara," before he tosses her across the room like she weighs nothing, sending her careening into a table, scattering everything across the floor as she slams into a pillar with a sickening crunch.

Diggle's already moving, running for Slade, his gun firing.

Oliver shouts, "Diggle, stay back!" but it's too late. The bullets are useless against the armor Slade's wearing, sparks flying everywhere.

"That'd be a waste of your bullets," Slade says with grim satisfaction and Diggle drops his gun, using his fists instead.

The mottled sound of Diggle's fists against metal fills the air as Oliver looks around, needing to know his family got out okay.

He catches a glimpse of blonde in the far corner, a flash of color, and he sees Felicity looking back for a split second.

Their eyes meet and the same rush of white noise surges through him, blinding him to anything but them.

The sound of Slade throwing Diggle into a glass case breaks the moment.

"Felicity, go!" Oliver shouts before he turns to face Slade and it takes every inch of fortitude to not turn and run to them, make sure they're okay, protect them when he hears Felicity's panicked, "Oliver, no!" before he's on Slade.

He wants to look back at her, needs to make sure they're okay…

The clang of the metal door signaling their escape severs the distraction.

Oliver attacks.

Chapter 3

Felicity runs.

She doesn't even think about it really. She can't. Leaving Oliver behind to face Slade is incomprehensible to her, but then there's Ellie. Her daughter. *Their* daughter.

There's not a question in her mind what would happen to the sweet little girl currently whimpering into her shoulder if Slade got his hands on her. She'd help *any* child in that position. But this child, this girl… the need to keep her safe is *primal*, overwhelming in its intensity.

So Felicity runs. She runs with a speed that her high school gym teacher would've never thought her capable of and she does it in three inch heels carrying thirty pounds of whimpering child clinging to her neck.

Every sense she has is on edge, heightened by adrenaline and fear, but even still the only sounds she takes in are Ellie's muffled cries, the beating of her own heart and the pounding of her shoes against uneven pavement as they reach her car and she throws the driver's side door open.

She thrusts Ellie in first, putting the little girl in the back of the small car - because kids are supposed to sit in the back right? That's safer? - and pauses at the sight of the girl's terrified watery gaze for only a second before she turns the key in the ignition.

"Buckle up, okay?" Felicity tells her.

"I don't have a car seat," Ellie says, lower lip quivering as she stares back. "And I dunno how to buckle."

Felicity's heart sinks at that. Five minutes as a mom and already she's failing. *Lovely*.

"Okay, that's… we need you out of sight anyhow. Can you get down on the floor and stay low?" she asks, urgency shading her voice.

"Like when we play hide from the bad man?" Ellie asks with wide innocent eyes.

Felicity chokes a little at the implications of that. What kind of life has

she given this girl? What kind of childhood includes drills for what to do in an attack that are disguised as games?

"Yes, baby, just like that," Felicity manages.

The little girl nods firmly but says nothing, curling up to make herself as small as possible on the floor of the back seat. Something inside Felicity dies a little at the sight, but she doesn't have time to dwell on that. Not now.

In spite of the fact that Slade is possibly after them, Felicity drives slightly below the speed limit and obeys every single traffic law like her life depends on it. And it might. Ellie's surely does.

She can't help glancing back toward the little girl every time the car rolls to a stop. Each time she does, she half expects to see nothing there. Because this is *crazy*. It is. And, considering the sort of things they go through routinely, she feels like that's saying a lot.

"How old are you?" Felicity wonders aloud after a few minutes when they've disappeared into a sea of traffic that floods the business district on a daily basis.

Ellie says nothing in response and Felicity does a double-take to make sure the girl is still there. What would happen to her if Oliver lost? If Slade killed him? Would she fade away as if she'd never existed in the first place? The very thought of that makes her nauseous.

"Ellie?" she asks again as the little girl peeks back at her with hesitancy painted on her pretty little face.

"I'm not supposed to talk during this game, momma," she whispers with great seriousness.

"Oh…" Felicity replies as it dawns on her that this makes a great deal of sense. "It's okay now. We aren't really playing anymore. Just… stay down because I could get it trouble if someone sees you in a car without a car seat, okay?"

"Yeah," Ellie agrees. "Is daddy okay?"

The fear in her voice is gut-wrenching and Felicity sucks in a breath as she tries to figure out exactly how to respond.

"I'm sure he's fine," she replies finally, which is the truth because Ellie is still *here*. "Your daddy's really strong, okay? And I know he'll do

everything he can to fight to get back to us."

"I know," Ellie replies with a little sigh. "That's what you always say."

"It is?" Felicity asks, ponytail whipping to the side as she looks back at the little girl in surprise.

"Yeah," Ellie says, having no idea how much weight her statement really has. "You tell me all the time that daddy loves us and he'll always do everything he can to keep us safe and come home."

"I do?" Felicity asks, absently wondering how she's managing words when she's pretty sure she's not able to breathe under the weight of Ellie's statement. "I tell you that he loves us?"

"Of course," Ellie says, looking at her like she's confusing her. Probably because she is. "He tells me, too. Families do that, momma."

Her's hadn't. Not at Ellie's age. She'd bet good money that Oliver's hadn't either. But Ellie's family… *their* family… they've given her that, at least. There might be uncertainty and danger in her young life, but there's a sense of stability, too. There's a certainty that her parents love her, that they love each other. And that's something. Maybe it's everything.

"I… right," Felicity manages.

"Where are we going?" Ellie asks a moment later. "I have to potty."

"You don't wear a diaper?" Felicity asks.

It's a little absurd how relieved that makes her. She *really* wasn't looking forward to diaper duty.

"I'm three and a half," Ellie tells her with intensely serious eyes that remind her more strikingly of Oliver than anything else about the little girl so far. "I'm not a baby."

"Right. Of course. I know that," Felicity says, as if she has any idea at all at what age children are potty-trained.

Looking around, she realizes she's driven toward Queen Consolidated without even really thinking about it. A quick glance at her phone shows no missed calls - something she tries not to think about because Oliver would have called if he'd beaten Slade by now. All things considered, QC isn't a terrible spot for them at the moment. It has

considerably more security than her apartment. It's familiar ground and has the sense of safety that comes with being surrounded by people she sort of knows.

As long as those people she 'sort of knows' don't include Isabel.

She's pretty sure Isabel took the office Robert Queen used to have when he was still the active CEO anyway, which meant different floors - heck, it meant different *corners* of the entire building.

"We're going to Queen Consolidated," she decides aloud. "It'll just be a few minutes. Can you hold it until we get there?"

"Yeah," Ellie confirms. "Queen Conso- Conso… What's that word?"

"Consolidated," Felicity tells her as she turns down the street toward the monolithic office building. "It's a hard one."

"It's a funny name," Ellie says, nodding with great seriousness. "Is that anything like Queen Inc?"

"Like *what*?" Felicity asks.

"Like your company, momma," Ellie clarifies.

"My… *my* company?" Felicity asks, eyebrows raising to previously unknown levels.

"Yeah," Ellie says absently, like she *hasn't* just dropped an enormous bomb. "Daddy says you're better at being in charge than he was. Aunt Thea says that's not very hard. Do you have any Cheerios, momma? I'm hungry."

"I… No. No, I do not have Cheerios," Felicity says, attempting to process everything Ellie is unwittingly telling her.

She can't remember the last time she bought Cheerios. MIT? Maybe? She's a coffee-for-breakfast kind of girl, really.

"We'll find you something to eat soon, okay? The vending machines in the break room have *got* to have something," Felicity says, muttering the last part to herself.

She's not above raiding the break room fridge if necessary. Edith from accounting always leaves donuts in there and she's not too proud to steal them to feed her child. Or herself, if she's being honest.

"Okay," Ellie says easily.

Felicity drives into the underground garage. One of the few truly fantastic perks that had come with being the CEO's executive assistant was her very own parking space... although since that position doesn't technically exist anymore - for her, at least; it probably exists for *someone*, someone desperate enough for a job to work for *Isabel*, presuming such a person isn't entirely mythical - is it still hers? The spot is empty, so Felicity really hopes that means it hasn't been passed along as someone else's job perk because getting towed would *suck*. But they're low on options, so she pulls into the spot and turns off the engine.

"Can I get up now?"

"Yeah, sweetie," Felicity says, eyes darting around the parking garage as she speaks. "We've got to move quickly, though, and I don't want you to wander off, okay?"

Ellie nods like she's taking the words to heart, her little face twisted with determination in a way that yet again strikingly reminds her of Oliver.

"We aren't staying here?" Ellie asks as Felicity as she climbs back into the front seat and puts her little fingers in Felicity's hand.

Felicity pauses at the sight of those little fingers placed so trustingly in hers. Ellie's grip is soft and effortless, curling into her hand with practiced ease bred from familiarity. At some point in her future, this is normal, holding her little girl's hand. It's such a small thing, in comparison to everything else going on today, but it throws Felicity for a loop and drives a resurgence of need to protect this child. It's strange, being so instantly connected to someone so thoroughly. And yet… and yet it's undeniable.

"No, we aren't staying here," Felicity says as they get out of the car and she picks the little girl up, as much because she wants to as it is that she needs to in order to move quickly.

"Because the bad man might look for us here?" Ellie asks her, wide-eyed with deep concern as the two of them get into the elevator.

"Maybe," Felicity admits, unwilling to lie about this. "But not right away. He doesn't have super speed like Barry, right? And your daddy's back at the lair - er, the cave, I meant the cave - and he's fighting him, so we're safe, okay?"

The mention of Oliver soothes Ellie almost instantly.

If she stopped to think about it, it might scare her how easily she's slipping into referring to Oliver as the girl's father, but she doesn't. Instead, she glances to her phone to see that she's *still* not missed any calls or texts and she tries not to let worry overtake her.

Screw it, she decides. She's going to text him. She'll just be *very* careful about what she says in case Slade somehow has the phone.

"I'm going to put you down for a minute, Ellie," she tells the three-year-old before easing the girl out of her arms.

Ellie's fingers tangle again with hers and Felicity finds out very quickly that one-handed typing on a cell phone is an art form that she has not yet mastered.

'*We're safe. On the move. Call when you're able.*'

She rereads it twice before punching send and blows some air through her lips as she looks up at the changing numbers that indicate their elevator's progress towards her floor.

"I wish daddy was here," Ellie says in a small voice as the elevator dings.

"Hey, we've got this," Felicity tells her, kneeling down to Ellie's level and looking her confidently in the eye. "I'm going to keep you safe. I promise."

"I know," Ellie says, looking sadder than Felicity thinks she can handle. "I just want daddy."

"Me too," Felicity mutters under her breath as they step off of the elevator and toward the glass-walled office. The city is lit up against the night sky outside the windows, and it's a little discombobulating watching her reflection walk into the office holding hands with her *daughter*.

"There's a bathroom through there," Felicity says, pointing toward the small room off of Oliver's office as they walk in - what used to be his office, at least. It's been emptied, leaving his desk and a lonely looking computer behind. Isabel clearly wasted *no* time. "Do you… um, do you need help?"

Ellie shakes her head no and wanders into the bathroom, the door

snicking shut quietly behind her. It's only once she's out of sight that Felicity drops into her desk chair with a heavy sigh. She gives herself thirty seconds to feel precisely how overwhelming all of this is before she commands herself to get it together.

She turns her computer on, nervously chewing on the tip of her tongue.

What she'd told Ellie was correct - they can't stay here. But they can't go back to her house either. The lair is compromised. She needs to hide a three year old away from the world and she's not immediately sure how to do that. False names at a hotel, maybe? A very awkward call to Lyla? She quickly dismisses that second option. She wants Ellie on Waller's radar almost as much as she wants her on Slade's.

It's going to have to be a hotel. She can't see any other options.

The Starling City Plaza's website is loading on her screen and Felicity's wondering if maybe a non-descript Holiday Inn wouldn't be a better idea when the elevator dings, announcing someone's arrival.

Frak.

Her eyes fly to the lobby, panic flooding her system all the way down to her toes. She shoots to her feet before the elevator doors have even opened and, without thinking about it, places herself in front of the bathroom door.

Is this what it's like for Oliver, she wonders? Is this instinctive need to protect the people around her how he feels *all* the time? And if it is, how does he manage that? She's been at this for less than an hour and she's already exhausted.

Her first thought is Isabel - had someone seen them on the security cameras? - and then her second thought is Jimmy, the security guard she always brought a scone to when she made her coffee runs because Isabel *would* do that, send Jimmy to escort her out of the office, like she's a criminal or something.

Felicity can't say that she's prepared for the person getting off of the elevator to be Slade - there is no preparing for Slade - but she is expecting it.

It's not him though.

No, it's the second worst option she can think of.

Okay, maybe third. Or fourth. Waller and Isabel would both probably be worse than Moira Queen. Maybe. Possibly. It's a close thing.

The crisp sound of heels on the floor precede her arrival.

"Mrs. Queen," Felicity squeaks more than says.

Cool and collected she is *not*.

"Miss Smoak," Moira responds with that lofty confidence that makes Felicity's flounder. "I was hoping to find my son in his office. He hasn't been returning my calls..." Moira's keen eyes dance over the very empty office. "But I can see he's not here."

"No," Felicity says, visibly fidgeting. "No, he's… not here. Obviously. He's at an off-site meeting. *Not* related to Queen Consolidated because Ms. Rochev kind of, you know…" She makes a cutting motion and Moira just stares at her. "But you probably already know that, because everyone knows that, because it was all over the news. And because this is, or was… your company. Uh… So, Oliver is around, he's just not *here*. I can… uh... I'll tell him you dropped by?"

Oh god, she fails at subtlety. She really, really does. She's the worst covert mother ever.

Felicity's eyes dart back towards the bathroom, willing Ellie to stay in there a little bit longer as she tries to think of something to say. Anything.

Words. Speak words.

Moira Queen is a lot of things, but stupid is not one of them.

The older woman's eyes narrow and Felicity gulps loudly enough that she can hear it.

She needs lessons in undercover work. Or practice. Or both.

"Where, exactly, did you say Oliver was?" Moira asks with a predatory focus that sends Felicity's stomach into convulsions.

"I… ah..." Felicity starts, but she's cut off by the bathroom door opening and Ellie wandering out.

To say her heart leaps right out of her chest is an understatement.

"Momma, I can't do the snap," Ellie says, sounding a little frustrated,

pulling on the closure of her jeans.

In other circumstances, Felicity might have savored the look of shock on Moira's face. Even now, it feels something like a triumph, which is kind of great, even though that may or may not be a positive thing. The woman always comes off as twenty feet tall and right now she looks... *normal*. But she can't dwell on one-upping Moira Queen, not here, not now. She doesn't have the opportunity to relish what feels like a victory over the future mother-in-law from hell.

Oh god, did she really just think that?

That's literally beyond her ability to process at the moment, so she hurries over to Ellie instead, kneeling to the little girl's level, helping her with the fastening on her pants before picking her up and holding her close as she rubs a smudge of dirt off the girl's cheek.

"I wasn't aware you had a child, Miss Smoak," Moira says slowly, eyes fixed on Ellie with an unreadable expression.

'*I wasn't either*,' flashes through her mind, but Felicity has the sense not to say it.

Mercifully.

Instead she stays uncharacteristically silent and holds Ellie a little tighter.

"Hi," Ellie says shyly toward Moira, leaning her little face against Felicity's collarbone. "Who're you?"

The question throws Felicity. Ellie doesn't know her. She hasn't met her grandmother. But... what?

"Hi there," Moira says, a strange softness to her voice that Felicity would not have believed the older woman capable of had she not heard it herself. A peculiar look transforms her face, and she looks so different it's jarring. "My name is Moira Queen. What's your name?"

"Really?" Ellie asks, looking utterly delighted. "My name is Elizabeth-"

"Oh!" Felicity's hand covers the little girl's mouth with an awkward laugh that sounds more like a cat dying, the sound mixing with Ellie's startled squeak.

The mixture of surprise and suspicion on Moira's face is one-hundred

percent understandable, given that, really, she's acting like a complete lunatic.

Moira's eyes linger on Ellie before sliding to Felicity, her brows furrowing in scrutiny, a scrutiny that makes Felicity feel like screaming as an anxious pressure starts to fill her chest.

The questions in the Queen matriarch's eyes are far more terrifying than anything Slade could incite, and not for the first time - more like the seventy-eighth time since she's left the foundry - Felicity wishes Oliver was there.

"I'm sorry," Felicity winces, backing away, inching in a wide circle back to her desk, to grab her purse and *run*. "We just… I'm sorry, we have to go."

"Is the bad man coming?" Ellie asks, worry threading her tone, and Felicity feels like crumbling under the weight of the look in Moira Queen's too-insightful eyes.

"Miss Smoak," Moira says, in a voice that reminds Felicity sharply of her own mother's when she'd accidentally blown up the microwave in seventh grade. "I think you had better tell me exactly what's going on here."

"I…" Felicity starts, eyes darting from Moira to the elevator and back down to Ellie. "It's..."

She doesn't know what to say. Any explanation she can think of tells Moira Queen entirely too much. And that is a *terrible* idea. A *horrible* idea. An idea better left for Oliver to handle, not *her*.

"I know what a mother's fear for her child looks like, Felicity," Moira continues, her voice softening, and Felicity does a double-take, both at the sound of her first name from the other woman's lips and the warmth in her suddenly finds herself really wanting to tell her, tell her everything because it is kinda too much.

She *can't* though because *terrible, horrible idea.*

"I've been where you are right now." Moira takes a step towards her. "I dislike that look on any mother's face. Please."

"There's…" Felicity falters before she finds herself admitting, "There's someone after us."

"Her father?" Moira asks gently.

"No," Felicity manages in a broken laugh. "No, that's not… No. There's… Her father did something, years ago. Or, actually, it's more like he *didn't* do something, but there's someone who thinks he did and he hates him for it. And that man, he would do..." Felicity hoists Ellie closer, her eyes slipping shut at the *possibilities*… She misses the look that slips over Moira's face. "He would do *anything* just to make him suffer. So I'm… I just… I need to keep Ellie safe."

There's a long moment of quiet. A look of grave seriousness on Moira's face shows she understands precisely how much danger they're in.

"I'm sure you'll understand if that sounds intensely familiar to me on a personal level," Moira finally says.

Felicity blinks.

The Undertaking.

Was this really how Moira had felt? The reason she'd gone through with helping to destroy the Glades? Felicity can't condone the woman's choices - she never will - but she finds, in light of today's events, she understands a little more the impossibility of the position the other woman had found herself in.

There hadn't been a good choice.

"I've always wondered… if there had been someone I could have turned to, would things have turned out differently?" Moira ventures, raising her eyebrows.

Felicity blinks. "What?"

"Running and… what, hiding out in a hotel?" Moira asks, gesturing towards Felicity's screen. Felicity cringes - *so bad at covert.* "That isn't the answer. You and your daughter will come back to Queen Manor where our security team will ensure that the two of you are safe."

"Oh, no... Mrs. Queen, that's..." Felicity starts.

"Moira," the other woman interrupts. She smiles and it's genuine, making Felicity falter. "Please, Felicity, I think we're past formalities at this point, don't you?"

"But... you can't stand me!" Felicity blurts out before she can think

twice about what she's saying. "I told Oliver about Thea. You *threatened* me. You said if I told Oliver he'd never trust me again, basically insinuating that you'd kind of help him get to that point, and..."

"Let's just say there may have been a few things I misjudged about you," Moira says. She smiles again. "As well as some things about your relationship with my son."

Felicity's blood freezes at that, the look in Moira's eyes pinning her in place.

She knows, Felicity realizes.

She knows.

She has no idea how or... *how*, but there's no doubt, not with the way Moira is looking at her, the way she'd stared silently at Ellie.

Felicity can't even begin to fathom how she's supposed to handle this.

The Manor, she wants them to come with her to the Manor… it's not smart, not even a little, but Felicity finds herself wanting to. There's something strangely *safe* in Moira's eyes that she knows she can't provide for Ellie, not right at the moment at least - she has actual security, and maybe even the element of '*Would they really go there where Slade could probably find them like that?'* It's got to be better than hiding out at QC, and a good place to meet with Oliver and *then* hide...

"Okay," Felicity agrees in a quiet voice, shifting Ellie a little in her arms.

"Okay?" Moira asks, waiting.

"We'll come with you," Felicity confirms. "For now. For Ellie."

Moira smiles, holding her arm out in a welcoming gesture.

"That's all I ask," she says. She waves to a bodyguard Felicity hadn't seen where he was lurking in the shadows. "Sam, please tell Phil to bring the car around."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh... no," Felicity says, already shaking her head. "I... I mean, *we* can drive there, you don't have to..."

"I insist," Moira replies. She appraises them, glancing around. "Are her things in your car?"

"Her...?"

Felicity looks down at Ellie. She has nothing - no clothes, no toys, no... whatever little kids traveled around with. She just has the dirtied clothes on her back, and for a reason Felicity can't quite name, it makes her profoundly sad - she didn't even *think* of that. She stares at Moira, shame coloring her face. She is *failing* at motherhood. It doesn't matter that Ellie doesn't actually *have* any of those things in this time, she still feels it.

"We… had to leave kinda quickly..."

Moira purses her lips - in *sympathy*, and if this hadn't already been quickly climbing the Weirdest Day Ever tower, it would be now - before smiling again.

"Alright then," she replies with a kind smile. "Let's go, shall we?"

"Right." Felicity moves to grab her purse. "Okay."

"Are we going home, momma?" Ellie asks as Felicity shuts her computer down.

"No, sweetie, we're going somewhere else," Felicity says, following Moira into the elevator bank. "Somewhere safe."

"But the lady said Queen Manor," Ellie replies, the word 'manor' coming out so adorably wrong it makes Felicity's chest hurt. The little girl leans in to whisper closer to her ear. "That's our home, isn't it, momma?"

Felicity's eyes widen, instantly flying to see if Moira heard her, but past a tiny tightening in the woman's shoulders, she doesn't react.

"Let's just see, okay?" Felicity whispers back.

"Okay," Ellie whispers, nodding.

Despite herself, Felicity grins as she looks down at her. "You are one brave little girl, do you know that?"

Ellie's grin is a perfect replica of hers, as is the little head nod she gives when she says, "Yep," like it's the most known fact in the world.

That chest thing happens again, followed quickly by a strange yearning.

The elevator dings, the doors sliding open.

Moira gestures Felicity in first before following.

"We'll call Oliver on the way," she says and Felicity barely bites back the startled yip at that as the doors slide shut.

Chapter 4

Oliver's shoulder is on *fire* as he pushes himself up to his feet. He can still feel Slade's hands gripping him too tightly before wrenching his arm back, nearly tearing it right out of the socket.

He hears the crunch of glass where Diggle's slowly getting up and he sees Sara's soft grey shirt as she slowly limps past him to the generator. A heavy switch sounds, followed quickly by the lights coming back to life, the harsh fluorescents flooding the foundry.

Ellie.

Felicity.

Oliver's hand flies to his pocket where his phone should be, but it's not there. A quick stab of panic has his chest tightening as he looks around quickly, eyes scanning the floor, ignoring the ugly twinge in his neck and how the muscles in his shoulder feel like they might snap.

There.

It had flown out of his pocket when Slade had slammed him to the floor.

"Oh damn it," Diggle moans, his palms digging into the glass where he pushes himself up. "That didn't go very well."

"You okay?" Sara asks him and he just grunts, swaying slightly when he finds his feet. She's cradling her arm against her chest, looking like even breathing is painful as she looks at Oliver. "Ollie?"

"I'm fine," Oliver says, his voice strained. His phone's off. As he powers it back up, he looks at her. "I need to find Felicity."

Are they safe? Did they make it? It feels like five seconds from when he'd last seen Felicity's blue eyes staring at him - worry and fear telling him she wanted to stay - to when Slade left…

Did they escape?

The thought of Slade somehow catching up to them makes the burning in his arm *worse*.

He'd barely been there for a few minutes and he'd taken them all out like they were nothing.

What if…

A fist of ice slams into Oliver's stomach at that thought. His mind instantly conjures up an image of Slade towering over Felicity where she's sprawled on the ground, her wrist mangled - just like Sara's - blood soaking through her shirt as she looks up at him…

He's holding Ellie, his giant hand wrapped around her tiny, fragile neck…

The chilled laughter from earlier echoes through his head.

No.

"Damn it," Oliver snaps, taking a quick breath, forcing his lungs to work as the image doesn't go away. He grits his jaw, his phone finally coming back to life. He swipes it open, a dozen notifications flooding his screen.

"Go," Sara says with a pained nod. "We'll clean up here."

"I'm sure they're fine, Oliver," Diggle says. "Felicity had plenty of time to get her out."

Her.

His daughter.

Oliver swallows down the trundle of acid that climbs up his gullet as he blinks at his phone, trying to make sense of what he's seeing. He has more than five missed calls from his mother, not exactly an abnormal occurrence these days, but it's the last text...

'When your mom calls play along.'

What?

It takes a second to realize he's actually seeing a text from Felicity, which means she's alright. He opens her messages and sees her earlier one saying they got away. Oliver's shoulders instantly deflate at that before going back to…

His mother.

And just like that, his phone rings, Moira Queen's smiling face popping up on his screen. A few hours ago, before everything, he wouldn't have answered, but his mother calling coupled with Felicity's text…

Felicity's with his mother.

Ellie's with his mother.

"Oh... *shit*," he breathes, making both Diggle and Sara freeze where they'd been moving to do whatever the hell they'd been talking about while Oliver had been lost in his thoughts.

Ellie.

Oliver answers.

"Mom?" He hopes she can't hear the urgent thread lacing through his words. The things that had seemed so important earlier are now so *trivial* - they definitely have issues, major issues that he and his mother need to hash out, but they are so far down on his priority list that they might as well cease to exist. "Is…"

"Oliver, good," Moira says. "I take it you're out of your meeting?"

"Out of my…?" Felicity's text flashes through his head. "Uh… Yeah, yes. I'm… done with my meeting. Is Felicity with you?"

"Yes. We're leaving Queen Consolidated now. We're heading to the house."

"The… house? You're..."

What the *hell* happened? How had Felicity even run into his mother? *Queen Consolidated*. She'd gone to the office? Although, at this point, that definitely seems to be the most logical place to go, considering Slade knows who she is, which means he knows where she lives, so of course Felicity would go to the next safest place.

"Yes, the house. I just wanted to let you know, so you were aware of where Miss Smoak was." There is a pause. "As well as her daughter."

Her daughter.

His mother has seen Ellie. The second he's able to comprehend that thought, Oliver feels like he's been kicked in the gut.

Does she know?

Has she seen it? Did she see what he saw when he first caught Ellie out the corner of his eye, a perfect mirror image of Thea one second, Felicity in the next?

The silence on the other end of the line feels like an answer in and of itself.

Oliver's heart sinks. What is he going to say, what are *they* going to say? '*Hey, mom, meet your future granddaughter. I know how impossible it sounds and it doesn't matter how it's happening, but it's true… I know it's true because when she looks at me, or when I hold her, or when I see Felicity looking at her like she does, I know it's true.*'

What the hell is he thinking?

How about a simple: '*This is Ellie.*'

Oliver scrubs his face with a silent sigh he feels in his bones. How much more could possibly happen? Everything is piling up - he'd thought dealing with Slade was going to be the worst thing that happened; he hadn't even considered Moira Queen seeing her yet-to-be born granddaughter.

"Oliver?"

"I'm here, sorry, I'm just…" What? He's what? Terrified? Desperate to see them with his own two eyes, make sure they're not harmed? Grateful and shocked and a thousand and one other emotions he can barely put a name to? Oliver goes with the first thing that pops into his head, and his voice is rougher than he'd like as he says, "Glad. I'm glad they're safe."

"Yes, they are," Moira responds slowly, pausing.

He hates every bit of what he's hearing in her voice. It's borderline methodical and it has stomach acid climbing up his throat. His snap reaction is to tell her it's none of her business, that she's done enough and he doesn't need any more of her 'help' if it's going to be anything like what she's done in the past, that he'll handle it. But he can't help feeling a gentle tug somewhere deep inside him - *gratitude* - that she found them instead of Slade, that she's helping them, protecting them.

It makes him feel better despite the extremely dire circumstances and his mother's already colorful history with Felicity.

Security at the mansion is substantially better than most places in Starling City. They'll be safe there, safer at least than anywhere else.

He wants to go, he wants to *see* but he can't afford to let them be a distraction from Slade, just like he can't afford to accidentally lead Slade to them. If he knows that Ellie is his daughter… god, he can't even *entertain* the idea.

And she is safe now, that's all that matters.

The thought that's been lingering in his mind since he realized how very *true* it all is rears its ugly head again - how could he think it was okay to have a family, that it was safe? How could he subject Felicity to this? How could he tie her to him like that, put their daughter in danger?

Guilt yanks at him, only making the desire to see Felicity and Ellie stronger.

"Okay, good," Oliver chokes out. "I need to take care of a few things so I'll…"

Moira doesn't give him a chance to finish.

"I think you should meet us at the house, Oliver," she says, her tone leaving no room for argument.

"Oh no, Mrs. Queen," Felicity starts in the background. "Oliver doesn't have to…"

"Are you talking to daddy?" Ellie interrupts her and panic slices through him. He can hear Felicity's hand muffling the rest of Ellie's words, but it's too late.

"No, no, that's not your daddy. He… isn't… that man, she's not talking to your daddy," Felicity says and Oliver doesn't have to see her to know she's panicking just as much as he is, with a heavy blush and that smile that shows just how bad at lying she is.

Oliver can see right through it, he knows his mother will.

"Momma, move your hand," Ellie says, and Oliver can imagine with startling perfection Ellie's little hand wrapping around Felicity's ring and pinkie finger as she pulls her hand away, her little brows pulled together in confusion as she says, "Daddy's name is Oliver."

She can't say his name, and it's the cutest damn thing he's ever heard, but it's also the *worst damn thing ever*.

Silence.

Oliver closes his eyes.

"We'll see you at the house, Oliver," Moira says, hanging up before he can respond.

"That wasn't a good conversation judging by the look on your face," Sara says, her voice still strained with pain. "Are they alright?"

Oliver looks up at her and Diggle, dread draining the blood from his face.

"Oliver?" Digg asks.

"They're good," Oliver replies. "They're safe. They're, uh… they're with my mom."

"They're with…" Sara's eyes widen. "Oh. How'd that happen?"

"I don't… it doesn't matter, because we have a bigger problem… on *top* of the *other* big problems we already have..." Oliver says, rubbing his eyes until they burn. He tries to take a deep breath, to make his lungs expand, but they're encased in concrete. "She knows."

"She… what?" Sara asks. "She knows? About Ellie being your daughter?"

"Oh," Diggle says, his mouth forming a little 'o'. "Well… that's not good."

Oliver narrows his eyes at the other man and Diggle just shrugs.

"I don't even know where to begin to help you with this, man," Diggle says.

Oliver's shoulders sag as the full implications of what this means hit him. He can't *deal* with this right now, he doesn't have *time* to deal with this right now. He doesn't have a single clue what he's going to say or how they're going to explain it. He can't even fathom a way to explain to her that she's just met her future granddaughter, that he and Felicity are going to be in a relationship in the future, that… that time travel exists and that he knows the kid who can *travel through time*.

"Oh god," he sighs. "I don't even know where to start."

"Try something simple," Sara suggests. "Like…" She pauses, and Oliver watches the wheels in her head as she struggles to find anything about this entire situation that is simple enough to explain Ellie's presence to his mother. "Uh…"

Oliver just closes his eyes.

Oliver gets to the Manor faster than he'd thought he would. He'd planned on taking the long, scenic routes, going in circles, retracing his steps a few times to make sure nobody was following him, but the thought of Felicity sitting in the Queen mansion on her own, with a little girl who more than met her energy output, and his mother? Oh god, were they in-laws in the future? Did they ever learn to get along?

It's pretty amazing how quickly he's deduced the strained relationship between Felicity and his mother, judging by the look Moira sent her after he'd confronted her about Malcolm being Thea's father. God, the thought of that alone still leaves a sour taste in his mouth. And now his daughter is around her, and so is Felicity, and… and he gets to the mansion pretty damn quickly, leaving Diggle to take Sara to the ER, brushing off their concern about his shoulder.

It hurts like hell, but it's nothing he can't handle.

And it's nothing compared to what he's about to walk into.

Because he *still* doesn't have a plausible explanation for Ellie.

Oliver blows out a heavy gush of air, and then he opens the front door.

"Felicity?"

Her name's out of his mouth before he can even think. He'd had every intention of walking in quietly, of seeing what was happening, getting a lay of the land, giving himself five more seconds to come up with *something*, but the instant he'd opened the door, he'd just wanted to see her.

And Ellie.

"Felicity?" he calls again, the door closing with a heavy slam as he makes his way through the foyer, heading for the main living room where barely audible sound comes from the television.

He hears a rustle of clothes followed quickly by the sound of the sofa cushions depressing and then there's a patter of little feet right before Ellie bursts around the corner, running straight for him with a sharp, "Daddy!"

For a split second, Oliver stops, shock and guilt weighing him down just as part of him bursts with the strangest euphoria as his daughter runs for him. Is this how she always greets him? What does he do? Does he swoop down and pick her up? Does he spin her? Do they have a ritual? It's like his mind's slammed face-first into a brick wall, trying to understand something it simply cannot, but his body knows exactly what to do.

Oliver meets her halfway and swoops her up into his arms, her pleased giggles echoing through the room as the words, "Hi, baby," slip out.

He's losing it. On one hand this feels like the most natural thing in the entire world and on the other he feels like someone or something is moving his body for him, going through the motions, scooping her up, holding her tightly against his chest.

Before he can say a second thing, Felicity steps into the foyer and heads straight for him, the clatter of her heels on the floor harsh and abrupt as she whispers, "Oh thank god," before reaching them. "Are you okay?"

"I'm alright," Oliver replies, nodding, shifting Ellie.

Felicity studies him, her eyes roving over his face before she hisses under her breath. She reaches up to cup his face gently, twisting his head to see the bruise he knows is already forming on his jaw under the stubble, something you'd only see if you really looked.

She bites her lip, and he doesn't miss how it trembles, but she doesn't say anything and before Oliver knows what he's doing he reaches up, grasping her shoulder in quiet reassurance.

He's okay.

They're okay.

Felicity nods, taking a breath, and her hand drops but she doesn't stop touching him, almost like she needs to really make sure. Her hand lands on his chest, her fingers brushing over his jacket lapel.

Oliver doesn't notice he hasn't stopped touching her. It's just natural. Because it's Felicity.

"Sara?" she asks. "John?"

"On their way to the hospital," Oliver says. Her eyes widen incredulously and he shakes his head. "They're fine. I think Diggle's shoulder needs some attention and Sara hurt her wrist, but they're okay."

Felicity nods again. "Okay, good. Is Slade…?"

"He got away," Oliver fills in, knowing he doesn't need to, but needing to say it regardless. Because that means the threat isn't over, that he's still out there… and that he saw Ellie. There's no way Slade could have been close enough to know she's his daughter - god, he hopes he's right - but that doesn't change the fact that he now knows there *is* a child in Oliver's life.

It makes him sick to his stomach that he doesn't know where Slade would draw the line. Oliver's not even sure there would be a line at all if he knew Ellie was his daughter.

Like she can see what he's thinking, Felicity's face crumples with a brand of fear he's never seen on her before, and he feels the undeniable urge to reassure her, to *tell* her that he won't let anything happen to either of them...

But she doesn't need it, because in the next second Felicity takes a deep breath, nodding with a quiet, "Okay then," as she pushes the fear back down.

Something he can't name fills his chest - she's so brave, and strong, so much stronger than he'll ever be, and for a split second, he feels a stab of pride that *she's* the mother of his child, that she agrees at some point in the future to go on this journey with him, that *she's* the one to give him a life he never thought he'd get in the future… As insane as the entire situation is, he knows what a gift Felicity Smoak is, and Oliver honestly can't believe he'd ever be that lucky.

Ellie's watching their exchange from where she has her head tucked under Oliver's chin, her eyes flying back and forth between them. When the conversation lulls, they both miss the frown that tugs at her lips, her little brow furrowing. She grips Oliver's shirt in a tight fist and sits up to look at him.

"Are you going to kiss momma?" she asks, and Oliver starts, his eyes flying to his daughter.

"What?"

Oliver and Felicity ask it simultaneously, their eyes widening almost comically because *what?*

"You always kiss us when you get back from a mission," Ellie says.

Oliver lets out a choked breath at the way she slaughters the word mission, but they both catch it all the same. He can feel the flush crawling up his cheeks at what she's suggesting and he glances at Felicity to find her staring wide-eyed at their daughter. He can tell without even thinking about it that she is studiously avoiding looking at him.

"Come on, daddy, kiss momma," Ellie says, yanking on his shirt as she talks. This time Felicity's eyes do fly to his and he's startled at how bright they are. "And then kiss us both."

"Uh, well…" Felicity starts but Ellie doesn't give them a second of reprieve. She reaches forward, her little hand gripping the back of Felicity's neck, pulling her closer as she yanks on Oliver's shirt.

"Kiss," she says. "Daddy says he always has to kiss us before he can do anything else."

"Ellie, I don't think we have time for that," Oliver says, readjusting his grip on her in an attempt to pull her away, but his daughter is nothing but persistent.

"Daddy, you have to," Ellie replies. "It's what you do. Kiss momma."

"O-okay," Felicity says, pinching her lips together until they're white. Oliver looks at her, and he can't explain the way his heart jumps up into his throat as she leans in. "Let's just…"

"Yeah," he breathes, and the way the word sounds coming out of him makes his stomach clench.

He's never allowed himself down this road with her, ever. Because she's Felicity and he's Oliver and that isn't what they do. They don't do this. It doesn't matter that the few times he has allowed himself to think about it it's left a horde of butterflies ramming the walls of his stomach or the dreams that have slipped through his subconscious have him waking with a flush he just ignores, not letting himself contemplate what it means… They don't *do this*.

And yet…

The sound of his blood rushing through his ears highlights the way his heart pounds as Felicity licks her lips, her eyes dropping down to his, and he realizes at the last second that she's gripping his jacket in a tight fist, almost like she's pulling him down to her as she lifts herself up and his arm has wrapped around her shoulder, pulling her into his embrace.

He's holding his girls, and the weirdest sensation of being *complete* fills him before he closes his eyes and dips down.

It's a soft, gentle kiss. It's nothing passionate or crazy, but that doesn't mean it doesn't take his breath away, that his heart doesn't skip a couple dozen beats, that he can't feel the light tremble in her frame, the soft sigh she lets out before she pushes herself closer, and for a quick second, he does the same, wanting *more*.

She tastes like coffee and raspberry mixed in with *her*, and Oliver inhales sharply, his mind working overtime to remember every single second of this, because what if it never happens again? It's perfectly subtle, perfectly *them* in a way he never thought possible.

It's over as quickly as it started and he pulls back, licking his lips, trying to chase the taste of her and he definitely doesn't miss the way her eyes darken as she watches him before they slip back up to meet his.

"Ellie kiss!" Ellie says loudly, a giggle in her voice, shattering the moment but not for long because she's leaning forward, pulling them both back in and they move instinctively, their lips find each other's again just as they kiss their daughter.

"There," Ellie says definitively. "Now we can go talk to the lady."

The lady?

The realization hits them at the same time and they both jump apart

like the other is on fire, Oliver's eyes instantly flying to entrance of the foyer where his mother is standing, her arms crossed, her eyebrow raised in silent contemplation, a quiet look on her face he's never seen before.

She saw it.

She saw everything.

Shit.

"Uh," he starts, hearing the rasp of Felicity wringing her hands as she too fights for something to say, but Moira cuts him off, closing the distance between them.

"I think you should start with how it is that I have a granddaughter and why I'm just now finding out about it," she says, her eyes on Oliver before shifting to Felicity.

"Uh, well… that's… I mean…" Felicity starts and Moira just raises her eyebrows, looking back at Oliver. Felicity's eyes fly to him as well and now he definitely knows he's blushing, he can feel his face turning red, so hot and fast it's painful.

His mind races, trying to find *something* that sounds better than the actual truth.

He's talking before his brain can catch up.

"It happened a few years ago," Oliver says, and he can *feel* Felicity's eyes on him as his mind weaves the story. "I was… I was in Starling City before."

"What?" Moira gasps and he's grateful as hell his mother's eyes are on him because when his eyes dart to Felicity, the same surprise is on her face.

He hadn't exactly planned on mentioning that he'd been home before coming back from Lian Yu, much less that he'd seen Felicity. It'd taken him months to remember it and it'd been such a small off-chance thing that it'd just become part of his history with her.

But now… now it worked, in a really awful way.

"It's a long story," Oliver says by way of explanation, causing Moira to open her mouth, ready to argue, but he cuts her off with, "It wasn't

safe for me to contact you, but I was here. I was at QC. I'd snuck in for something. She was fixing a computer problem in dad's office and I saw her talking to my picture on his desk and I just… I couldn't hide from her. I didn't want to. And then… there was Ellie."

Felicity's jaw is hanging open and she barely has time to snap it shut before Moira is looking back at her. He hopes to high hell his mother doesn't see how pale Felicity is, or how wide her eyes are. There's just enough truth woven into his lie that she probably sees some inkling of it.

"And…"

But he's got nothing else. It was the best he could do.

He can see the wheels in Moira's head turning as she processes this information… and he sees the second everything shifts.

She doesn't believe him.

"And so you hired her as your executive assistant because she was the mother of your child, who you just happened to meet again in the IT department of your family's company?"

How the hell does she know so much?

"Oliver, you can't possibly expect me to believe that," Moira says. "Felicity is many things, but she certainly does not strike me as someone who would go through all that grief just to show you your daughter, nor does she strike me as a golddigger, as your story almost points to.

"And judging by what I just saw, this isn't something that just came about in the last few months. You have feelings for her, Oliver, feelings that we both know have been going on longer than that."

His mouth goes dry as Felicity makes a tiny 'Meep!' sound that they all ignore.

Moira's eyes bounce between them.

"The truth," she says. "Please."

Silence reigns. It's so quiet Oliver can hear the grandfather clock in the far corner of the house going off, just as he can hear Raisa in the pantry buried in the kitchen, just as he can hear what sounds like a

lawnmower somewhere outside.

"She's from the future," Felicity blurts and Oliver shoots a wide-eyed look at her. But she's on a roll, "She's our daughter from the future, where we are together apparently, and our friend Barry brought her back because she's in danger there."

Moira blinks. "Excuse me?"

Chapter 5

"I beg your pardon?" Moira asks, blinking at Felicity with a focus that leaves the younger woman squirming.

Felicity decides she's lost her mind. Clearly. Because there's literally no other explanation for her blurting out the incredible truth to *Moira Queen* of all people. A nervous laughter ripples through her, because honestly she'd have thought there was no way to make this situation more ridiculous, but somehow she seems to have managed it.

"And… I said all that because wouldn't that be crazy? I mean, it makes the *real* story sound better, doesn't it? Where we met up… a few years ago and had sex, which I guess is fairly obvious since the evidence of that is right there and…"

"You're a particularly poor liar, Miss Smoak," Moira interrupts, leveling her with a disbelieving look.

"Mom…" Oliver starts, shifting awkwardly and holding Ellie closely in a way that tugs strangely at Felicity's heartstrings.

"Don't start with me, Oliver. You haven't been able to lie to me convincingly since you and Tommy broke my grandmother's vase at your sister's second birthday party," Moira says, cutting him off abruptly.

"Daddy?" Ellie asks, drawing all of their attention to her as she tugs on his collar.

"Yeah, honey?" he asks in such an automatic way that it makes Felicity's mouth go dry. And the way he looks down at her, like… it's like she's his entire world. Does he realize what he's doing, how his entire demeanor changes around her? How when Ellie speaks, he shifts? Or how when she looks at him or moves even an inch, he holds her closer?

The change is so stark from what he was like in the foundry that it leaves Felicity's head spinning. It's like the danger of facing Slade forced a whole new perspective on him.

Oliver Queen is a natural at many things - he has faced every challenge that comes before him without hesitation, letting himself be molded into whatever he needs to be in that moment - but this... this

he'd fought.

At first.

But now...

Tears sting Felicity's eyes, a feeling making her chest feel too tight, and she forces herself to look away before the stupid things fall, because *crying* would make everything better.

What is she *doing*? Time for random hormonal attacks *later*.

"If the lady's your momma, does that make her my gramma?" Ellie asks with huge curious eyes.

Bewilderment crosses Oliver's face as he tries to understand exactly what she's saying.

"Uh, I… yeah, it does," Oliver says, with a slightly pained look on his face. His eyes fly to Felicity's, almost like he's seeking confirmation, and the confusion in his face makes her step closer before she knows what she's doing, her stomach sinking. Oliver looks back to Ellie. "You don't know her?"

"Nuh uh," Ellie says, shaking her head. "I have one gramma. She wears lots of sparkly dresses like a princess. My other gramma was gone before I was in momma's tummy."

"What?" Oliver whispers.

Felicity's eyes fly to Moira. She'd already suspected as much, given Ellie's unfamiliarity with her paternal grandmother, but hearing it stated so bluntly and in such an innocent way brings a hollow sense of sadness to her that she hadn't expected. She's not sure if it's for Oliver, or Ellie, or herself. After all, this is *Moira Queen* they're talking about. Her sins are many and it's not as though they've ever seen eye-to-eye. Felicity's not entirely certain that having that woman in her or Oliver's life is a *good* thing, much less having her in their child's.

It's one thing to think it though, and another thing entirely when it becomes reality.

Moira's face is unreadable, but Felicity catches the slight quiver of her lip anyway. It's not fear or sadness for herself, but the realization that she'll never get to meet her grandchild other than this… it clearly affects her deeply.

And Oliver…

He looks like someone just sucked his innards out of his chest through a straw as he stares at Moira.

Felicity reaches for him without thinking, wrapping her hand around his arm, squeezing tightly.

He's trembling.

She can't even imagine - he just found out his mother is going to die, and soon, considering Ellie's age… although that leaves out the specific part of the equation of not really knowing how old *Felicity* is when Ellie's born. Maybe there's more time than they think.

Ellie's studying her grandmother. "Daddy said my other gramma was very, very brave, that she saved him and Aunt Thea from a bad man."

Oliver looks flat-out gutted and Felicity can't help but whisper his name in consolation.

How strange a thing to console him for a loss that hasn't even happened yet.

"He said she was very beautiful…" Ellie fumbles with the word, making it sound more like 'booytiful' and it makes what she's saying all the more endearing. "And that she had pretty hair, like my other gramma, and that she smelled like home."

Moira lets out a disbelieving laugh just as Oliver chokes out a noise, and Felicity tears her eyes away from Ellie to glance up at him; he's riveted on his mother, but Moira only has eyes for her granddaughter.

"Then…" Moira says, her usually even and regal tone fluctuating a little. Felicity wonders if she just imagined the sound of her voice cracking. "I should say that it's very nice to meet you, Miss Elizabeth."

The Queen matriarch looks more affected by Ellie's words than Felicity might have thought possible from the older woman. She watches Moira move a little closer and sees something shiny in her eyes.

Tears?

Felicity's own tears well again and she bites her lip to keep them at bay - part of her feels like she should leave, that she's intruding on a private family moment that doesn't concern her, but the rest of her

refuses to budge. Because, she realizes, this *is* her family.

And Oliver's leaning into her, more than he had been a second ago, and she knows she won't leave for anything, not as long as he needs her.

Ellie bites her bottom lip, dipping her chin slightly, looking almost reticent, and despite herself, Felicity can't really blame the kid - Moira Queen makes her feel way more than reticent, even when she looks slightly more emotionally compromised than usual.

Moira dips her head to catch Ellie's eye. "I'm quite grateful to have the opportunity."

Maybe it's the grownup way Moira talks to her or that Ellie is really realizing this woman is important in her life, but whatever it is has her blushing slightly, a swift change from the talkative toddler they'd just seen.

It's so painfully *adorable*, Felicity's chest does the thing again.

"Hi," Ellie says a little shyly, curling in towards Oliver more. Her eyes dance over Moira's face and hair, catching on the earrings she wears, the trademark Queen mole on her lip, and… "You have a pretty necklace. Aunt Thea has one like that too."

It's the same one, Felicity's sure of it, but Ellie has no way of knowing that. It looks old and it's strangely subdued for Moira's taste. It's not cheap by any means, but it's understated, with only two small emerald stones in the center, simple in a way that seems contrary to the woman's more expensive taste.

"Thank you," Moira says, her fingers running along the chain. "It was my mother's. My father gave it to her when my younger sister was born. The two stones are meant to represent their two children - me and Colleen. You remind me of her very much, Ellie."

"Is she here too?" Ellie asks, looking around as though someone else might materialize in front of her. Then again, given the way she and Barry travelled this morning, it's probably totally plausible that someone might from her perspective.

"No, my darling girl," Moira says, her whole face shaded in a kind of sorrow that Felicity's never seen the other woman wear. It's deeper, making her look oddly younger than anything else. "I'm afraid she never had the chance to grow up. She had an accident and got very

sick when she was… just a few years older than you, I imagine. But if you had green eyes, you'd be every bit her spitting image."

"Spitting is naughty," Ellie says gravely in reply.

Moira huffs out another delicate little laugh and shakes her head before turning back to look at Felicity.

"Time travel?" she queries.

"What?" Felicity asks, blanching. "No, that's… not… possible?"

She looks to Oliver, but he's just staring at Moira and when Felicity glances back at her, she catches the same look reflected on her face and for the first time since she's met him, she notices the resemblance between them. He'd always looked just like his father - the spitting image, to use Moira's words - but in that moment, she sees the same understanding flowing between them, something that runs deeper than words can express and she knows Oliver's just been shoved back onto the path of forgiveness with his mother.

"I think… we should talk," Oliver finally says and Moira nods.

"Indeed. And we will. But in the meantime, regardless of… *how* she," Moira says, looking to Ellie, "came to be here and the logistics surrounding her birth, my granddaughter needs to be protected, and that's the first priority. What are you doing to keep her safe?"

Count on Moira Queen to declare herself the cool, calm, collected CEO of a crisis giving the words 'epic proportions' new meaning.

"I've known she exists for barely longer than you, mom," Oliver says, and Felicity blinks, still trying to come to terms with the fact that Moira Queen knows about time travel - and how is that again? - but also that they're talking about it like they're discussing what kind of croissants to have with brunch. "So far we've just been focused on immediate danger, of which there's been… a lot."

A lot.

Right, so… Moira Queen knows about time travel, she knows she has a granddaughter in the future that she'll never meet and that Felicity is that kid's mother… but she doesn't know about The Arrow. Yet. But of course, the day's not over yet and with the way things have been going lately, Felicity's not about to place any bets.

"We haven't really had much of a chance to form a plan," Oliver finishes lamely.

"And this danger is from…?" Moira asks, eyes darting between the two of them expectantly.

Oliver hesitates and Felicity follows his lead, because this is so not her place to… lead, or whatever. And it's clear he doesn't really want to answer. He doesn't like giving up parts of his past in general, but that's especially true when it comes to his mother. Whether it's because he wants to protect her, or if it's really because he doesn't trust her, or because he's afraid of her judgment, Felicity isn't sure, but she thinks it's a mixture of the last two that makes him bite his lip like he does when he's nervous.

And then he looks at her, like she'll have the answers, and when she sees the quiet confusion and borderline desperation in his eyes, she wishes like heck she *did* have the answer, but she doesn't.

Telling Moira means telling her more than Oliver probably ever wanted to, and the woman isn't stupid; she can see right through them - she already *has*. Slade could've at least given them a few minutes to talk about a cover story, or to fine tune the whopper Oliver had delivered about being in Starling before, which was huge in and of itself. Her inner Oliver-meter tells her he isn't lying about that - he *was* in Starling City, and that opens up a whole other can of worms, a can of worms they do not have time for.

This entire ridiculous thing could have been avoided if Felicity had just gone somewhere else, anywhere else… but where? There'd been nowhere she felt safe. Alright, it could've been avoided if Moira hadn't chosen that exact time to show up and see her and Ellie. Or if Oliver didn't carry around genes that make Ellie look uncannily like Moira's baby sister.

The more Felicity thinks, the more her brain starts to misfire and she has no idea what to do.

Oliver pinches his lips like he can read her own inner turmoil, but Moira saves them both the trouble.

"Whomever it is," Moira says, taking a second to look at both of them, giving them a moment to appreciate the gravity of what she's saying. "I suggest you take aim at them and eliminate the problem."

Eliminate.

Felicity shivers as Oliver's jaw drops, his eyes widening incredulously.

Moira sees it, a small knowing smile lights her face. "You and I have *both* taken care of problems for far less, Oliver." She looks at Felicity and then Ellie. "That's what you do for family."

Her words ring through the foyer, and Felicity is once again reminded why Moira Queen is both a formidable foe and downright *terrifying*. Her emotional landscape is throwing Felicity for a loop - it makes her seem more vulnerable than she is, and Felicity doesn't realize until Oliver moves closer to her that she's gripping him so tightly her nail beds hurt.

It's not fear that's making her do that, but understanding. Because - besides her disturbingly insightful use of the word *aim* which is fully making Felicity rethink the notion that Moira doesn't know Oliver's *other* secret - what Moira is suggesting is something that Felicity knows instinctively she'd do for Ellie, for Oliver.

And that is freaking her right out.

"Shall we go sit back down?" Moira asks, gesturing to the next room where Felicity and Ellie had been sitting with her, waiting for Oliver. Felicity's mind jumps to the giant ship in there, the ship she hadn't been able to stop staring at like it was staring at her. It always struck her as weirdly tragic considering what the ocean had done to the Queen family. Moira laces her fingers together. "We can talk about this... threat coming for Ellie, and what we can do."

We.

"Uh…" Felicity starts but Oliver stops her, pulling his arm out of her grasp. A wild flare of nakedness strikes her, like he's leaving her alone under the scarily attentive microscope that is Moira Queen, but he doesn't go anywhere.

Instead, he wraps his arm around her waist.

Felicity really needs to have a sitdown with her body - her dumb heart chooses the most inopportune and illogical times to leap into her throat.

Especially when Moira's eyes drop down as well, catching the movement.

Ellie looks happy as a clam, like this is nothing new. And it probably

isn't. To her, anyhow.

"Mom, I need to talk to Felicity for a second."

"Of course," Moira replies with a smile.

Oliver glances down at the bundle in his arms, hesitating. "Ellie, honey, can you…"

"We were coloring," Ellie tells him. "She has a coloring book full of flowers!"

"Shall we get back to it?" Moira asks as Oliver sets Ellie back down. She holds her hand out for Ellie and the little girl takes it without skipping a beat, the shy little toddler she'd been a moment ago gone. "Let's let your mommy and daddy talk for a minute."

"Okay, that is something I will so not be getting used to anytime soon," Felicity whispers as Moira and Ellie walk away, and then Oliver's grabbing her hand, pulling her in the opposite direction. "Oliver, if I had known she was going to be there, I wouldn't've-"

"Felicity, it's fine," Oliver says, tugging her into an office and closing the door. He turns to her, his hands landing on her shoulders as he dips his head to meet her eyes. "I only care that you're both safe."

"Well, great, because we are safe, but I might've accidentally just outed you to your mother," Felicity responds, making a face. "She took that really well considering we just confirmed *time travel* is a thing, and she guessed it herself! We just learned about it ourselves a few hours ago! I was sort of hoping she'd just laugh it off because of how *ridiculous* it sounds, but she was serious. She was *serious*. Did you see her face? She was serious and then oh my god, she saw us *kissing* and I can't believe how sappy future-us are." Felicity pauses. "I mean, sappy in a good way, because it was nice - *really* nice - it was definitely a kiss for the books, if they had kissing books. They probably do. That seems like a thing that would exist. I mean just look at the book Madonna put out, right? I can't believe Ellie made us kiss. And that we went along with it! We aren't very much into the discipline, are we? Unless we're talking about that in some other capacity and then mayb-"

"Felicity," Oliver says, his voice sharp, cutting her off abruptly. Felicity's jaw snaps shut as he leans down again, looking her in the eye, his eyebrows nearly touching his hairline and she can see that this is more than stressing him out. And she isn't helping. "Take a

breath."

Felicity nods, doing so, and he moves with her.

"Normally…" Oliver starts, squeezing her shoulders gently with an unsteady smile. "Normally I love hearing everything you have to say but right now, right now I'm…"

Right now they'd basically just confirmed that his mother isn't alive in the future, in their daughter's future.

"Oliver," Felicity breathes, reaching to touch his face before changing her mind, her hands landing on his chest before changing her mind again, gripping his jacket instead.

God, she just wants to comfort him, why is she suddenly thinking so much?

Oliver's eyes slip shut for a split second and that same gutted look is back. This time Felicity can't stop herself, and she doesn't want to. She reaches up and cups his face.

"It could mean anything, Oliver," she whispers.

He takes a shaky breath and she tightens her grip on his cheek, forcing him to open his eyes.

"And you know about it now, right?" she asks. "Which means you can stop it."

He lets out a disbelieving little laugh as he shakes his head. "I wouldn't even know where to start," he says, tears making his eyes shiny before he blinks them away. "What would I do, keep her locked up somewhere? It could happen tomorrow or years from now, I don't…" He closes his eyes. "I've spent so much time being so mad at her, but I always thought… she'd be there, as…"

Tears blur her vision again and Felicity bites her lip to keep them from falling. She wants nothing more than to take his pain away, to give him a second's reprieve, to let him just exist without something weighing him down, without the *world* weighing him down. She wants to send him out there, to send him to his daughter and his mother. To give them time together, time that he's going to be robbed of.

But they don't *have* that time.

As if he can hear her thoughts, Oliver lets out a shuddery sigh, bowing his head before squaring his shoulders again, bracing himself.

"You should stay here," Oliver says and Felicity's heart drops, the word 'no' on her lips, but he cuts her off. "I saw she doubled the security. There's no way Slade's getting in here without someone knowing something, so it'll give you enough time to run if you have to, all of you. Protect Ellie and-"

"And where exactly are you going?" Felicity asks, cutting him off. "Not even getting into the fact that you're leaving me alone with your mother and our future daughter - whom, just for the record, is only highlighting how very little I know about babies, okay? Nothing, I know nothing, it's a miracle she's even alive." Felicity closes her eyes, wincing. "And by that I mean in that she hasn't starved to death or something. Besides that, what exactly is your plan here, Oliver?"

Oliver doesn't answer for a second and Felicity looks up at him.

He's staring at her, something soft and wistful in his eyes, something that makes her stomach plummet.

"You're an amazing mom," he says, his voice quiet and gentle. "I don't have to be in the future to know that."

"I'm sure future-me is far more capable than now-me."

"But you love her," he says bluntly, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"Oliver, I don't even… I mean, I know… she's… I don't know her, and I feel like…"

"But it's there," Oliver says, talking over her. "It's… I don't know how to explain it, but…"

He stares down at her, his eyes as open and expressive as she's ever seen. They're luminescent, the sharp cobalt brightening from a thin sheen of tears, remnants of the gut punch he'd just received. She knows what he's trying to say, because she felt it too, the instant she held Ellie.

Ellie is *her* daughter. And Oliver is the little girl's father. And it is… *perfect.*

The air between them slowly grows heavy with something she doesn't

know what to name.

"Yeah," Felicity finally says, nodding. "You just know."

"Yeah."

Neither of them move, letting the knowledge of what happens in the future wash over them.

"I always thought you'd make a great dad," Felicity whispers, smiling quietly before replaying her own words in her head and letting the implications of them settle in. "And that insinuates that I've thought about it, but I haven't thought about it, not like *that*. Not like an *us* sort of that or… Or maybe I have," she says, waving towards the closed door. "Considering the walking, talking evidence is right out there."

Oliver gives her a breathy chuckle, shaking his head minutely.

"So are we going to talk about the fact that we have a daughter together at some point in the future?" Felicity ask softly. "Because it's pretty… whoa."

"I…" Oliver starts, but he stops himself. He licks his lips, his eyes dancing all over her face, like he wants to say something, but he doesn't. And Felicity finds herself wanting to hear what he was going to say.

But the longer the silence continues, the more the nervous herd of butterflies in her stomach starts to spin faster, crawling up her gullet.

And it only gets worse as Oliver just stands there, saying nothing, *doing* nothing.

"Or not," Felicity says, laughing. It sounds as bad as she knew it would. "That is so the least of our problems right now, and that reminds me, you haven't shared this grand plan of yours, and it better be good, because if it's something as stupid as storming his super secret villain lair then I'll be pissed."

An involuntary grin pulls at his lips, the same one he always has on his lips when she has a pointed comment about something he's done or something he's about to do. This one is laced with sadness though.

"No," he said. "It's not that. But we do have to do something."

"Why?" Felicity asks. "How about we deal with one crisis at a time? It's not like *nobody's* out there, Sara and John are-"

"In the hospital."

"*At* the hospital, you said their injuries weren't that bad," Felicity replies, her voice rising slightly. "Which they aren't, right?" He gives her a slight nod in concession and she continues, "Good. And see? They can help. And I… I think, maybe… maybe you should stay and talk with your mom."

Pain skates over his features and Oliver closes his eyes, already shaking his head.

"Oliver, come on, take a few minutes, slow down," Felicity says. "What if this is…"

"Don't," he says, cutting her off. "For all we know, just knowing about it has changed the timeline. What if now that we know we have a daughter, we never…"

He pauses, realizing the weight of what he's saying. Felicity blinks, taking a deep breath at the insinuation.

"We never have her," Felicity finishes for him.

The thought hurts more than she will ever admit because he's right - this has already changed things irrevocably between them. Even if everything goes to plan, even if Ellie goes back to her time once the threat has been eliminated, even if she's gone in the next few hours, things won't be the same between them, ever. How can they be?

And *god*, the thought of Ellie not existing… it leaves her feeling *empty*. Just the *thought* of that little girl out there no longer existing, no longer coming into the world, no longer being *hers* - being *theirs* - it makes her stomach tighten in anguish and she shoves it down before she really loses it, because… *no*.

Her world's already been rocked enough tonight, she doesn't need it rocked *more*.

"Well, we don't know that," Felicity says. "It's not like she's disappeared right before our eyes, which means we're still… on track for it. I would think."

"Felicity…"

"No, Oliver, stop. Even if you did go out now, you'd have no idea where to start. Let Sara and Digg heal, let's get you patched up and then we can talk about what happens next. Okay?"

"I just… I don't like the thought of him being out there," Oliver says softly. "Especially because he saw her. And you."

"He doesn't know Ellie's your daughter," Felicity replies. "He might know she's mine, but he can't know that you and I… I mean, we're not… a thing… so maybe you're like… Uncle Oliver." Oliver makes a face and she winces. "Okay, creepy connotation aside, what I'm trying to say is don't assume the worst."

"That's literally the only thing we should be assuming," Oliver replies, and Felicity narrows her eyes.

"While normally I'd be right there with you on the agreement train, this time I just… I can't." Felicity stops, trying to find the words to explain exactly why. Because it's not just her, or Oliver, or Diggle, or anyone else - it's her daughter, *their* daughter, and she finds herself feeling oddly optimistic just because she wants that for Ellie.

Weird.

"Yeah," Oliver says, because he gets it. He knows. Felicity looks at him, their eyes meeting, and she knows he knows exactly what she's saying.

"One crisis at a time," Felicity offers. "Plus, Ellie kept asking for you." She gives him a delicate smile. "She feels safer with you around. And so do I."

Oliver's face softens, his body relaxing like she's just told him everything is going to be okay and he believes it.

He finally nods. "I'll call Diggle, get an update, and then… we'll go from there."

Chapter 6

They talk to Digg together. His reassuring voice booming through the speakerphone settles something ill-at-ease in Felicity's gut - knowing he and Sara had only sustained minor injuries and hearing her friend's voice reassure her himself were two entirely different things.

"Pinkie swear?" Felicity asks. "Like *really* you're fine? My version of fine, not Oliver's."

Oliver shoots her a look and raises his eyebrows in unveiled amusement, but it's not like she's *wrong*. Oliver's definition of fine basically means he's breathing and can physically move. Her version involves a whole lot less pain. None. No pain. Fine means pain-free in her book.

"They didn't even try to get me to take the special aspirin, Felicity," Digg reassures her, sounding every bit as amused as Oliver looks.

"Sara too?" Felicity prods.

"They might try to get her to take the good drugs," Digg admits. "She's back for x-rays now. Her wrist doesn't look good."

"Sara won't take anything," Oliver says with absolute certainty.

He would know, Felicity realizes, considering she's his girlfriend. And… *wow*… there's a thought she'd somehow managed to entirely avoid throughout this entire debacle. While there's plenty of evidence a room or two over that eventually she and Oliver are most definitely together, they aren't *now*. And she totally kissed her friend's boyfriend. Regardless of the circumstances, that's not the sort of thing Felicity does and she feels more than a little ill at the thought.

"Have her call me when she gets back," Oliver requests.

Felicity can't quite read his expression. It's serious and a little grim, like maybe he's lightly biting the inside of his lip. He presses his fingertips to his temple as he stares at the phone and she has to wonder what exactly he's planning on saying to Sara. Or has he already? Did they already talk about it after Slade? Felicity really, really doubts that. It's an impossible situation for all of them. It's not like he can be faulted for his future child zipping back through time, but it also is a very sure sign that he and Sara don't work out in the

long run.

Or, at least, that they didn't in Ellie's timeline.

Wow, talk about about a relationship death omen.

They still *could*, of course. If that's what Oliver wants and what Sara wants. The future isn't set in stone. For all Felicity knows, maybe this has thrown into stark relief how much he wants to make things work with Sara. It's not like Oliver's particularly open about what he's feeling. But, *oh god*, the very notion of him with Sara makes her head swim and nausea well up in her gut. Ellie has to happen. That sweet little girl in the other room needs to exist. And the idea that maybe she *won't* is enough to make Felicity's hands shake all over again as a wave of nerves rolls through her.

"She's coming back now," Digg says suddenly, breaking through Felicity's thoughts. "I'll hand you over."

Oliver promptly clicks off the speaker and puts the phone to his ear, sparing Felicity a brief, anxious glance as he does.

"Hey," he says softly into the phone. "How bad's the wrist?"

He's quiet for a moment, taking in whatever Sara's saying and more than any other moment since stepping foot in Queen manor, Felicity feels like an intruder. She looks around the office like she's trying not to pay attention to Oliver's conversation. Is she supposed to stay? Should she leave? Is he checking on his teammate's injuries or is he having an awkward conversation with his girlfriend? There's no rulebook for this situation and she would very much appreciate some guidance at the moment, thanks.

She's shifting back on her heels and staring with feigned interest at what's probably an absurdly expensive painting of a boat that hangs on the far wall - and *wow*, there are a lot of boats in this place, all things considered - when Oliver's hand skims down her arm, sending a trail of goosebumps skittering across her skin as as he draws her attention back to him.

"Do you mind giving me just a moment?" he asks, hand covering the mouthpiece of the phone as he looks at her.

"Oh. Right. I… yeah," she gulps, blinking rapidly and breaking eye contact, her eyes darting everywhere but him. Privacy, he needs privacy to talk to his girlfriend. "Of course. Obviously, that's… I'm just

gonna go check on Ellie."

God, she feels like an idiot. No, she *is* an idiot.

She'd thought she and Oliver were on the same page, or at least reading the same *book*. Now, considering the Sara of it all - *remembering* the Sara of it all - she's not even sure they're reading the same *genre*.

How could she so easily forget?

The uneasiness that settles over her is uncomfortable, sitting like an ill-fitting sweater that leaves her feeling fidgety and awkward.

Her lips press together in a thin line and she bites down like she's physically trying to keep her worries from rolling off her tongue. Given her propensity to inadvertently babble her inner thoughts, there's some merit to that idea.

She shifts, turns to go, but Oliver grips her hand for a second, drawing her surprised gaze back up to him.

"Five minutes," he tells her, his gaze heavy and his voice laden with… *something*.

It's that *something* that has her chest loosening, letting her take a deep breath. She nods, unable to break eye contact with him. She doesn't dare hazard a guess about what he's going to say to Sara, but the anxiety that was building shifts, morphs into something dimmer, something more manageable.

He settles something inside her, in that way that only he seems to have.

Felicity can't remember exactly when she gave him that power over her, that ability to affect her so starkly on such a fundamental level. It's striking, when she thinks about it, precisely how easily he could shatter her heart… if she let him. Her chest starts tightening again at the realization that she *wants* to take that chance, she wants him to take that chance, *them* to take the chance. She's had decidedly non-platonic feelings for him from the get-go - like, immediately from the get-go, the second he walked into her office and tried to lie to her face - but this is different.

This is *more*.

It makes her fragile and hopeful all at once, and she doesn't quite know what to do with that.

"Okay," she agrees after a beat. "I'll be… coloring with Ellie. Take your time."

He nods and says nothing in return, but she can feel his eyes on her as she leaves right up until she shuts the office door behind her.

Part of her lingers in that room with him. She can't help it. Her mind focuses wholly on the conversation he's having. She tries to push it away, tries to think about anything else, but she fails entirely until she finds herself in the kitchen and takes in the sight of her daughter coloring with painstaking amounts of concentration that remind her solidly of Oliver when he's training.

Moira glances up with a smile.

"She's quite the little artist," the older woman says with a note of pride in her voice that Felicity has only ever heard from the woman when speaking about her children. "She decided she wanted to draw her family."

Felicity startles at that, looks at the drawing with renewed interest. There's a whole lot more people on it than just her, Oliver and Ellie, and her curiosity is piqued.

"Can you tell me about your drawing?" Felicity asks, sliding onto the barstool next to Ellie.

"I don't have enough room," Ellie says with a little huff. "I'm only doing my family in Star City. I need another paper for my Central City family."

"Star City?" Moira asks, looking on with fondness shining in her eyes. "You mean Starling City, dear?"

"No," Ellie shakes her head, not bothering to explain as she scribbles riotous curls of hair on a stick figure. Star City? Felicity frowns and looks up at Moira, whose brows furrow in confusion before she meets Felicity's gaze.

To say the moment of understanding that flows between them is jarring would be an understatement, as the gravity of what Ellie being there means starts to really settle in. So many changes in the future - are they good? Bad? Well obviously *some* of them are bad considering

Ellie doesn't even know her own grandmother.

She sees Oliver's face from earlier, and her heart aches, remembering how he'd tried to push it down, to bottle it up in that Oliver way of his. He was right, about not knowing where to even start with the possibility of changing things, and that doesn't even get into how very much they should not even be *considering* changing things… it's hard not to though.

The urge to find out more is intense. Talk about a *mystery*; everyone's future is a mystery, sure, but the key to some of what happens in her life is sitting right in front of her. It's the opposite of smart though, she knows that on a rational level. Who knows how much of it will change just because she knows Ellie exists now?

But changes like the name of the city, what is that about?

"How about you tell me who everyone is?" Felicity asks, instinctively letting her hand drift to stroke through the Ellie's soft, loose curls.

"That's Digg," she says, pointing to a massive figure that takes up the entire height of the page.

"He's very tall," Moira notes.

"He *is*," Ellie nods fiercely and with great seriousness. "He's *the tallest ever*. It is very fun to ride on his shoulders."

A grin breaks out across Felicity's face at that mental image and she has to cover her mouth to keep in a laugh.

"And who is this?" Moira asks, pointing to the figure next to Digg.

"Lyla," Ellie announces. "And next to her are Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea and then momma and daddy."

Moira sucks in a breath at *Uncle Roy and Aunt Thea*, but says nothing. It's just as well, Felicity is focused wholly on the drawing anyhow. It's just circles and lines, but she and Oliver are leaning against each other with obvious closeness and huge smiles that make Felicity's heart ache with want. And with gratefulness, she realizes with sudden surprise. She hadn't had that growing up. Even before her dad had left, her parents had been more arguments than affection. If this picture is anything to go by, Ellie at least has stability and real happiness in her family life, even if it is obviously lacking in other ways.

Supervillains don't much allow for predictability, after all.

"Why did you use a circle for mommy when you used a line for everyone else?" Felicity wonders aloud.

"Because the baby in your tummy makes it round," Ellie says, looking at her like it's all so obvious.

Felicity completely freezes at that, her hand stilling on the back of Ellie's head, her breath catching in her throat. She can feel Moira staring at her over Ellie's head, but she doesn't look. She can't. Her eyes are glued on the little rounded, smiling stick figure of herself that her daughter's drawn.

"What?" she manages after a moment.

"He's got to stay in there until he's ready to come out," Ellie tells her solemnly. "Even if you are ready for him to be on your outside already. It's not safe for him yet. He has to wait. Daddy says so."

"It's a boy?" is the only thing Felicity can manage, her free hand resting against her flat stomach seemingly of its own will.

"Yeah," Ellie says matter-of-factly, as if she hasn't just completely rocked her mother's sense of reality. "I wanted a sister because Sara's *like* my sister, but she's not really. I wanted a real one. But you said we didn't get to pick. I guess a little brother won't be so bad. Maybe he'll like coloring too."

"Sara's a little old to be your sister, isn't she?" Moira ventures, probably mostly to relieve Felicity of the burden of trying to find a response.

"Maybe a little. She's seven," Ellie agrees. "That's *really* old. It's almost grown-up. She's in *first grade*."

"Ellie… Sara's older than seven," Felicity says, finding her voice, forcing herself to breathe normal. "She's almost daddy's age."

"Not *that* Sara," Ellie says rolling her eyes. "Digg and Lyla's Sara."

She points to the short curly haired figure who her own stick figure is apparently holding hands with.

"Digg and Lyla have a daughter?" Felicity asks, blinking rapidly at that realization.

And… now she's learning way too much about their futures. Despite the nearly insane sudden urge to start asking questions, Felicity knows this can't be a good idea, at all. Knowing too much jeopardizes everything and - so far - with very few exceptions, their futures sound kinda, sorta… *fantastic*. Sure, there's losing Moira and *something* bad happening to her and whatever it is that forced Barry to bring Ellie back in time in the first place, but the rest of it… she wants it with a fierceness she could never have expected, and the more Ellie talks about their future, the *more* she wants it.

But what if knowing too much changes *everything*?

"Yeah," Ellie says, putting down her crayon after finishing a smiley face on the sun. "Can I have another sheet of paper, please? I need to draw my Central City family. I can't leave out William and Barry and the others."

William?

"Who is-"

"Hey," Oliver greets, interrupting her train of thought as he wanders into the room with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Hi, daddy!" Ellie says excitedly, hopping off the stool and holding up the paper she's been working on. "I drew a picture for you!"

"It's beautiful, Ellie," he tells her, crouching down to her level and wrapping an arm around her while she points out the different people she's drawn.

She's *beaming* as Oliver focuses entirely on her and her art. There is so much pride on her little face at her father's approval that it utterly melts something inside Felicity. She'd been right. He's an amazing father. And the sight of this, of the instant bond between Ellie and her dad, it redoubles the desire to have something real with him. She wants this, wants him, with every last fiber of her being.

Which takes her right back to square one because this is *Oliver*, and he's in a relationship, and it's dandy that this happens eventually, but right now, it's just… complicated.

Which makes her want to grab onto both of them and never let go.

"Can I keep it?" Oliver asks Ellie. "I'd like to hang it up, if that's okay with you."

"I would be honored," Ellie tells him primly with a nod of her little head.

Oliver laughs - Felicity grins at the sound of 'honored' coming off her daughter's lips, definitely not missing the longing behind it - and draws her into a hug, kissing the blonde curls on the top of her head, holding onto her tightly like he's savoring the moment. His hands span the whole of her little back and he's got his eyes shut as he buries his nose in her hair, breathing in her scent.

Felicity knows she's staring at them, knows the yearning she feels inside is visible, vaguely aware that Moira Queen is still in the room with them, but she sort of fails to connect those two ideas until the older woman's hand settles on her shoulder. Felicity jolts to look at the Queen matriarch's surprisingly approving eyes.

"You will find, I think, that the only thing a mother wants more for her children than a father like that is for them to one day have the great fortune of being parents themselves," she says quietly enough that Oliver can't hear. "I am grateful… *humbled*, even, to have the privilege to witness my son as the sort of father I have always known he would someday be. I owe you no small amount of thanks for that."

"I haven't *done* anything," Felicity protests automatically.

"You're a smart woman, Miss Smoak… *Felicity*," Moira says, correcting herself. "You know better than that."

"But, Mrs. Queen, this…"

"Moira," she interrupts. "Please."

"Uh… okay, Moira." The name feels just as awkward on her tongue as this entire exchange, and it only makes her more aware of her hand still on her shoulder. "This isn't *real* yet."

"She seems quite real to me," Moira counters. "And I have no doubt that she seems real to you and Oliver, especially since we don't know how long she's with us. Perhaps we will have her a day or a week or a year before she disappears back to her own time. Either way, it will hurt whenever she goes, and maybe I will never live to see her sweet little face again, but do not for a *second* believe that makes this moment with her any less valuable *now*."

For all of Moira's faults, there is no denying the woman is both perceptive and so full of maternal love that she's actually *glowing*.

Felicity's never seen this side of her before, not ever, and she blinks, feeling like she's looking at a completely different person.

"How about you draw another picture for mommy?" Oliver asks as he pulls back from Ellie, causing them to turn back to where he's kneeling next to the toddler. "We can hang them up next to each other, okay?"

"Okay," Ellie says, nodding firmly like a little girl on a mission before she scurries back to the stool and takes a blank sheet of paper from Moira's outstretched hand. "I'll draw my Central City family for momma."

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Oliver asks.

It takes Felicity a moment to realize he's talking to her. And, when she does, she sort of jolts at the realization. His hands are back in his pockets and he's waiting for her response, eyebrows knit together. He's *nervous*. It dawns on her all of a sudden, and for the first time since all of this craziness started, she wonders if maybe his heart isn't in her hands just as much as hers rests in his.

Whoa.

She's getting ahead of herself, right? She is, because this nervousness could literally be about anything - he's nervous about Slade, about their daughter, the fact that they have a daughter, their future, that they have a future that involves a '*their*,' that Moira knows about Ellie, that she knows about *time travel*…

So many things.

Talking to her is just another thing, a thing he does all the time.

Right?

"Of course," Felicity says, sliding off the barstool and heading with him out into the hall.

He doesn't stop there though, and that sends her anticipation into overdrive - is it good anticipation, bad anticipation?

He keeps walking until they're back in the office. The light press of his fingers on the small of her back guides her gently along the way and her heart hammers in her throat as she realizes whatever he's going to say is absolutely going to change things. Is he going to apologize and

tell her that he's still with Sara? Is he going to say something about *them*? She has no idea, but the moment builds in her mind, only getting worse when he closes the door again. It swamps her thoughts and presses down heavily on her lungs, leaving her breaths shallow and forced.

"So, um… so how's Sara?" she asks, wrapping her arms around her midsection as he leaves her side to lean back against the desk, his fingers curling around the edge of the hard wood surface.

"She's been better," Oliver says. "She's been worse too, though. Her wrist is broken. The doctors are insisting on a cast."

Felicity winces at that.

"Yeah… exactly," Oliver huffs out a laugh. "You can imagine how well that went over."

"She's… ah… having a hell of a day," Felicity replies, her voice tight and her smile forced. "Broken wrist defending her boyfriend's child from the future whose mother is… not her."

Oliver draws in a long breath before letting it out very, very slowly through thinned lips.

"It's… over," he says as his fingers rub along the underside of the desk.

Trepidation slams into her with so much force she almost forgets she's standing because… what is over? Them, as in her and Oliver? They weren't even a them yet, there wasn't anything there - is this his way of saying he chose Sara, that he…?

"Me and Sara, I mean," he finishes.

Felicity really, *really* hopes she isn't showing exactly how relieved those words make her. Still, she can't hide the way her shoulders drop or the breathy, "*Oh*," that manages to slip out.

Oh.

And then her heart hurts for him because really, their day's been long enough, shouldn't it go uphill at some point, if the Fates were even a little nice?

"I'm sorry," she finally tells him.

"I'm not," he replies immediately, and Felicity starts at that.

"Did she… break up with you because of Ellie?" she ventures.

"Not exactly," Oliver offers, licking his lips and swallowing hard.

"Then what-"

"I broke up with her," Oliver confesses quickly - too quickly. "Or maybe... we broke up with each other, I'm not sure, actually."

Felicity blinks.

Whatever she'd been expecting him to say, that hadn't been it.

"Oh," she says, white noise buzzing in her head. "That's… is that because of…" She holds her hands up but she has no idea what to do with them - gesture at *them* as in her-and-Oliver-them, or at… Ellie, or Slade, or… "Help me out here, Oliver. Why'd you do that?"

His gaze burns into her, leaving her raw and *so* vulnerable - he looks like he's *choosing* her, like he wants *her*.

Blood rushes through Felicity's ears, that anticipation from earlier suddenly roaring through her veins… but she doesn't know it for certain. She doesn't know what he means, what this means, what any of it means.

All she knows, with the same alarming certainty that she *needs* Ellie to continue existing, is what she wants to hear from him. Badly, so badly she aches for it.

"Because I never looked to the future with Sara," Oliver says, dipping his head as he speaks, as if he's struggling to find the right words. "I never wanted to, and it wasn't just with her, it was… in general, because I didn't think I could have one, not like…" He pauses, and then he looks *right at her*. "But it's hard to avoid looking at the future when it's staring back at you, looking like everything you never thought you'd be able to have."

Oh god.

It's not exactly what she'd thought she'd hear, not exactly what she'd almost hoped to hear... but it's *close*, so close that her heart thuds wildly at the prospect.

Did that include her, as in a her-and-him-equals-them thing?

She wants to ask it, she wants to so badly she can taste the words, but

she doesn't.

The distance between them starts feel like a bowstring pulled taut with tension, waiting to snap at any second.

"At... Ellie," Felicity says with a nod, ignoring the way her voice cracks. "You mean at Ellie."

He says nothing, staring at her instead, staring at her in a way that makes her mouth go dry because she wonders if that isn't *exactly* what he meant. For a split second she thinks he might clarify things, tell her what he *really* means… but then a tight smile that doesn't reach his eyes tugs at his lips, and the moment is lost.

"Yeah," Oliver says, nodding slowly, furrowing his brow as he speaks. "At Ellie."

He's lying, she knows it as surely as she did when his coffee shop was in a bad neighborhood and when he ran out of sports bottles. But this time, she doesn't know *why* he's lying. Alright, she sort of knows why, because the entire situation is very *wow*, but at the same time… she's not sure if he's lying to just her, or himself as well.

But she doesn't say anything.

Oliver's gaze wavers, his shoulders twitching as she stares at him. He's not sure what she's going to do, or say, and if she's being honest, neither is she.

It's been a hell of a day, and *she's* struggling with everything that's suddenly being lobbed right at them… He needs more time, to come to terms with how his life is changing right before him - how it's being *forced* to change right before him - and she has to let him have that, because she knows what it means that he even *admitted* to looking into the future and thinking…

Maybe.

The thought makes her heart pound. Maybe she needs more time herself.

"Okay," Felicity says.

He can't hold her gaze and it's that fact alone that tells her he knows she's aware that he's not telling her everything, but he's also aware she's letting him get away with it. For now.

"It's late," she follows up a moment later. "I'm sure Ellie's getting tired. Or, actually, I have no idea what time of day it was when Barry zipped her back a few years. Maybe she's not tired. Maybe she'd just gotten up for the day. But *I'm* tired, so she needs to go to sleep too... and *oh my god,* I'm my *mother*." Her jaw drops. "It's like every time ever she told me to put on a sweater because she was cold."

Oliver's grin is far more genuine in reaction to the horror at that thought rolling through her, because *she is totally her mother*.

His eyes twinkle as he shakes his head and pushes off the desk to close in on her as he says, "It doesn't sound that bad."

"You don't know my mother, Oliver," Felicity says, turning towards the door. "At least not yet anyway. Oh my god, she's gonna have a cow when she finds out. I mean, a surprise granddaughter will be crazy, but she'll have even more of a cow when she finds out that you and I… are a… well, in the future, I mean… This is confusing."

Oliver's smile widens, his hand falling on her lower back as he moves right past her ramble. "We should get Ellie on a normal sleep schedule, just in case."

"That's ironic coming from us," Felicity says, raising an eyebrow at him. "You realize that, right?"

"Maybe," he allows. "But… she's our little girl."

Felicity would be lying to herself if she didn't admit everything inside her *melts* at that, quickly followed by her brain short-circuiting because he just referred to Ellie as their little girl.

"And," Oliver continues. "I figure we're allowed to want a little bit of normalcy for her."

Normalcy.

Like them being a them sort of normalcy.

She manages to nod her head in agreement with a, "Right," as Oliver opens the door for her before they both head back to the kitchen.

Back to their daughter.

Chapter 7

"So," Felicity says as they follow the sound of Ellie and his mother's voice back to the kitchen. "Sleeping arrangements..."

If she notices his hand hasn't left her lower back, she doesn't say anything, and he doesn't move it. He doesn't *want* to move it, and for once, he listens to that urge. She's warm; he can feel the subtle shifts in her muscles as she walks, moving under his touch, and it just feels *right*. It all feels right.

Breaking things off with Sara had been easier than he'd thought.

"*Yeah, I kinda figured that's where this was headed."*

"*Sara…"*

"*No, it makes sense, Ollie. A lot more than you know. You have a kid, Oliver. With Felicity, and that… You need someone who knows how to harness that light that's still inside you, and we both know that person isn't me. But I'm pretty sure we both know it could be her."*

Inevitable had been the word Sara had used - Oliver wasn't sure if she'd been referring to them or to Felicity, and he's still not sure. All he knows is that he has a daughter in the future, with Felicity, and that when he'd kissed her - holding both of them in his arms - it'd *resonated*.

It's still resonating.

Without realizing they're doing it, they both pause outside the kitchen as Moira asks Ellie if she's hungry. The gentle tenor in his mother's voice makes Oliver's chest ache - he's still upset with her, about Malcolm being Thea's father, the Undertaking, the lies, so many lies… but for all her faults and shortcomings, Oliver can't deny that she was a good mom, to both him and Thea. Hearing that unique tone in her voice again reminds him of being little, of sitting in that very kitchen as she and Raisa discuss the dinner menu, her wandering over to check his homework over his shoulder. They were gone a lot, his parents, but when they were around, especially Moira... it was good.

To think she might never have gotten a chance to meet her granddaughter makes his blood run cold - he has his issues with his mother, but he'd never, ever wish that on her.

"When was the last time you ate, sweetheart?"

"I ate with momma and daddy," Ellie replies, concentrating on her drawing.

Oliver's pretty sure it will never not be weird to hear his daughter talking about their future selves.

"Oh? What'd you have?"

He takes a steadying breath, listening to Ellie as she talks to her grandmother about chicken cordon bleu - he lets out a breathy chuckle at her pronunciation, pausing only when he hears her says it's *his* chicken cordon bleu - he cooks? - and that, "The fireman had to come the last time momma tried to cook it."

"I see some things won't be changing," Felicity says under her breath.

A quick grin lights his face as he quietly asks, "Not a great cook?"

"If by 'Not a great cook?' you mean, 'Are you a really awful cook?' then yes," she says dryly, giving him a smile. "I burn water, it's a rare talent. Although it sounds like you're there to save our family from water poisoning." She looks at him. "And since when can you cook?"

Oliver shrugs, shaking his head. "I can't. Maybe I learned because you almost burn the house down."

Felicity nudges his shoulder with hers. "I'd be offended except that probably does almost happen all the time."

He chuckles as she turns to peek around the doorjamb. Oliver looks around her, his chest clenching when he sees Moira sitting with Ellie, using some of her crayons to do her own drawing. Every few seconds Moira looks up at Ellie, a tiny smile on her lips, and Oliver knows exactly what she's feeling - wonder, amazement, *love*.

Ellie's little brow is furrowed with concentration as she carefully draws her Central City family - at least that's what he assumes she's drawing. Her *Central City family* - so does that mean Barry really embraces his new, what, powers? Is that what they're called? And Ellie obviously knows them - she definitely knew Barry - so that means Oliver and Felicity are involved in their lives as well.

Oliver's future was always one thing: paying penance. Whenever he looked into it, he always saw himself, alone, in the dark, saving as

many people as he could, righting the wrongs of those around him, making the world better, paying for the sins laid at his feet. He'd always assumed he would stay in the foundry, stay in Starling City, and he'd be isolated, because… because he didn't deserve *this*.

But he gets it. Somehow, some way, this becomes his life.

How is it possible he's ever this lucky?

"Can you believe we create that little human in there?" Felicity whispers, the same wonder filling him coloring her voice.

"No," Oliver answers honestly and he more feels than sees Felicity moving, turning to look up at him. He swallows, a tiny herd of butterflies filling his stomach as he tears his eyes off Ellie and looks at her.

He'd lied, earlier, when she'd asked him why he'd broken up with Sara… and he knew she knew he'd lied. Did she know why though? Did she know that seeing her like this, with their daughter, *knowing* that this was his future, was opening up something deep inside him that he'd locked away the instant he'd recognized it for what it was? He'd always been terrified at the prospect of having children, of bringing them into his dangerous life, but now that he's seen her - *his daughter* - and he knows she exists because of the amazing woman standing before him, now that he knows what it's like to have both of them in his life, that it's not a burden or something to be scared of but something to be celebrated, something that brings so much life and joy into his world… now that he *knows* what that feels like...

He *wants* it.

Badly.

But even though he knows he's literally looking at his future right now, he can't bring himself to *say it*, not yet. What happens between now and then? When do they get together, when do they have Ellie? What happens with Slade, with his mother, with the rest of the team?

He knows he has this life to look forward to… but is there a cost to it? Is this what Felicity wants, did she choose this?

Why?

Felicity's searching his eyes, her face softening like she can see what he's thinking written all over him, and she breathes, "Oliver," before

she reaches up and cups his cheek. His eyes slip shut for a split second as he turns into her touch, his shoulders sagging. Her other hand covers his heart and for that split second he lets himself leans into her, letting go under the weight of the day's events as she says, "I believe it."

His eyes fly open, instantly finding hers and the utter certainty in her eyes warms his chest, and in that second he knows - she chose this, this life, to live in his world, to give him a daughter... she chose him.

Something deep inside him cracks open.

Oliver takes a stuttered breath and she smiles, her beautiful Felicity smile that's full of confidence and reassurance and *knowledge*. She does believe it - she believes in their future, in him, and that thought alone is more healing than anything he could have ever done.

He wants this.

He wants her.

It's the first time he's ever actively thought it - he's *known*, for a long time, that his feelings for her had crossed a line, ever since he saw the look on her face in Russia, since he was faced with the reality of losing her if the Count had had his way… but it was never something he could have, not ever, until now. Because now he *knows* he can have it, can have her, and it's everything he's ever wanted.

He doesn't have to meet his future self to know that, he just *knows*.

It's so damn freeing that he almost falls over.

"Felicity," he sighs, and for the first time in as long as he can remember, he touches her how he wants to. Oliver lifts his hands, skating his palms over her shoulders before sliding down her arms until he's grasping her forearms gently. He feels her slight hesitation, feels her start to pull back like she's thinking he's going to push her away and he tightens his hold on her, holding her closer.

Her eyes widen, her lips falling open in surprise and he almost says it…

"Momma, look!"

Ellie appears out of nowhere - he didn't even hear her *moving*, much less the sound of her running towards them - and they both look down

to see her proud little face as she holds up her picture for them to see.

"Here, momma, this one's for you," she says.

It doesn't escape his attention that neither of them let go of each other until Felicity moves to take the drawing from their daughter.

"Oh wow," Felicity says. "This is beautiful." She angles it towards Oliver who nods, his eyes skating over the various stick figures, trying to put names to them but he has no idea where to start. "Thank you, Ellie."

"That's our Central City family. It has William, and Sammy, and Cisco, and Caitlin, and look…" Ellie pushes onto her toes, pulling on Felicity's arm to pull her back down to her level to point out the lone figure in red. It has little lightning bolts around him - so she's aware of Barry's extracurricular activities as much as she's aware that Oliver obviously goes on 'missions.' "That's Uncle Barry!"

"Yeah, it is," Felicity says. "It looks just like him. This is going to go up right next to the picture you drew for daddy."

Ellie beams.

"How about we get ready for bed?" Oliver suggests, and movement out the corner of his eye has him looking up to find Moira leaning her shoulder against the wall, her eyes on them. "Ellie, you want to go with mommy to…"

To… what? What did she do to get ready for bed? What did *any* toddler do to get ready for bed?

"Clean our faces and brush our teeth," Ellie says with a nod. "I know, daddy."

"Oh, well…" Oliver watches her walk back into the kitchen to put her drawing down. "Okay then."

Moira chuckles. "She's certainly very headstrong."

"She doesn't get that from me," Felicity says and Oliver snorts. She looks at him. "Hey, I am extremely easygoing."

"In what world are you easygoing?"

"In all of them," Felicity replies. He makes a face and she pokes him in the chest. "More than you, that's for sure."

Oliver smiles easily, grabbing her hand with a genial, "Okay, sure."

He honestly can't remember the last time he'd smiled without some part of it being forced, without some part of him being locked down, hidden away… No, that's not true, sometimes he does smile, even if it's so tiny nobody catches it.

It's usually because of her.

That thought alone - letting himself think it *at all* - has another piece inside him shifting into place.

Felicity narrows her eyes at him - he wonders if she realizes she hasn't taken her hand back, or that her index finger is running over the back of his hand, like it's the most natural thing in the world - just as Ellie comes back out.

Oliver's not sure who drops their hands first, or if they do it together, or… or if he's thinking too much - he's suddenly far more aware of Felicity than ever before.

Do they hold hands in the future? Is that something she does when their fingers are linked? Does he ever pull her hand into both of his, dragging his finger down the center of her palm just to see hers flutter, to hear her giggle or feel her face as she pushes into his neck, her grinning lips pressed against his pulse point, so soft…

What the *hell* is he thinking?

God, it's like now that he *knows* what's waiting for him, knows what the future holds for him - *for them* - he wants it *now*, but it's something he can't have right away.

Or is it?

"Uh, okay, so…" Felicity starts and Moira steps in.

"You can use Oliver's old room for tonight," she says. His breath catches at that as she nods towards the foyer and the stairs. Felicity's jaw drops. "Take the left staircase, it's the fourth door on the left."

"Oh, but that's… that's not..." Felicity shakes her head as she struggles for words. Ellie moves towards her mother. Does Felicity know how instinctively she moves around her, how her hands come up to her daughter's shoulders, how she pulls her in closer? "We can…"

"Hey, it's okay," Oliver says, his fingers grazing her shoulder, wordlessly telling her there's no way he's letting them out of his sight. "There's a couch in there."

Felicity's eyes find him. "Oh." She's still not convinced and he more than understands - just a couple hours ago, she'd thought the craziest part of their day had been how to stop a psycho bent on burning the city to the ground in his revenge against Oliver… now their Worry List includes their future daughter and sleeping arrangements.

"And the bathroom has everything you need," Moira adds.

"Okay then," Felicity says. Her eyes dart between Moira and Oliver, and he moves towards the stairs, holding his hand out for her to go first. "I guess we'll…"

"Oliver, can I have a moment?" Moira asks.

"Uh…" His first reaction is still to say, '*No,'* but he bites it off. "Yeah." He looks at Felicity. "I'll be up in a minute."

"Okay," Felicity says with a smile, a smile he recognizes as the one she'd given him when she first suggested he talk to his mother. He finds himself returning it before she looks down at Ellie. "Let's get scrubbin', huh?"

Oliver watches them leave.

"What's the name of the microorganisms on our faces again, momma?" Ellie asks, the word 'microorganisms' coming out in a mess as they walk back into the foyer.

Felicity's answer fades away as they head upstairs and Oliver turns back to his mother.

She's staring at him with a wistful expression.

"I wasn't sure when I'd have the honor to see that look on your face again," she says.

Oliver furrows his brow. "What look?"

"Happiness," Moira replies.

He has no idea what to say to that.

Moira takes a few steps towards him, looking like she's gathering

herself before she says, "I know there are a lot of things we need to discuss, and we will, but I only have one question: what sort of danger is my granddaughter in, Oliver?"

"I don't know," he answers, his eyes straying to where Felicity and Ellie had gone. If he listens hard enough, he can hear them. "The… person, who brought her here, he didn't… there wasn't enough time to really explain what was going on, or why."

"Does it have anything to do with your… with what you do?"

Oliver's heart stops, his eyes shooting back to her. She doesn't… she *can't* know. He frowns, a stinging shiver falling down his spine as he takes a step back, trying to think of what she's implying, what she's asking, because she can't possibly…

"What?" he asks, the word barely audible.

Moira cocks her head, a small almost sad smile pulling at her lips. "Oliver, I know."

He stares at her. "You…?" He shakes his head. "How...?"

"I've known, for about a year. Since the Undertaking, I suppose." She clasps her hands together. "A lot of things became very clear that night."

She knows. The thought rattles through his head, over and over… she knows what he's done, who he's killed, who died because of him, that *he* brought so much madness to the city in his efforts to save it…

He can't *comprehend* it.

It must be all over his face because she makes a tiny sound in the back of her throat and steps towards him with a soft, "Oh, Oliver..." She cups his face as she says, "I could not be any more proud of you."

Oliver lets out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding, his head dipping slightly as the gravity of what she's saying hits him, leaving him feeling oddly hollow. It'd been the first and foremost thing at the front of his mind when he'd come back to Starling City: to protect his family, meaning they could never know. It'd been a burden he hadn't realized weighed so much until Diggle, and it'd lightened even more when he shared his secret with Felicity… but his *mother* knowing who he is, what he does… His eyes slip shut, his shoulders falling as some of the weight slides right off.

Her hands slide down to his shoulders, feeling diminutive against his wide frame - despite that, he knows they can carry more than he can imagine - that they *have* carried more.

Proud.

She's proud of him, and Oliver never knew how much he craved it until that moment.

"Will you tell me about it?" she asks and he stiffens. "Only if you wish to, of course. I just… I want to help, in any way I can. Especially if it concerns Ellie."

"I, uh…" Oliver scrambles for what to say next, his mind still trying to come to terms with the fact that he's talking about this with his mother, of all people. She looks so plaintive, and open, and he honestly believes she does want to help. He *knows* she does, but considering the damage their relationship's been suffering, it's still a little jarring.

"Do you know who's after her?"

"Someone named Zoom," Oliver replies, wincing as he says it, taking a second to marvel because there's no way that's this person's actual name. Her eyebrows inch up, but there's no recognition on her face. "Although he might not be the only danger anymore."

"What exactly does that mean?" Moira asks.

"It means that while Zoom is apparently chasing Ellie through time, she was dropped off in *this* time at a… not great time. Someone else saw her."

Wariness tightens Moira's face. She draws her shoulders back, her jaw tightening, and Oliver blinks at the sudden transformation - this, standing before him, is Moira Queen, the woman who did everything and anything for her family. He suddenly understands a helluva lot more about *everything* than he did a few hours ago.

"Someone else knows about her?" she asks.

"I don't know if he knows that she's mine," Oliver says, the rightness of calling Ellie *his* warming him. She *is* his, there's no more doubt about that. "But he did see her."

"And who is 'he'?"

Oliver hesitates, remembering very well his mother's last encounter with him. "It's Slade Wilson."

Disbelief has her furrowing her brow before she blinks it away, her mind racing to connect the dots between the new information and what she already knows.

"There's a lot you don't know, about him." Oliver pauses. "And about me."

Moira narrows her eyes. "You've met him before?"

"Yeah," Oliver says slowly. "On the island."

Her strong facade crumbles for a brief second at the mention of Lian Yu and Oliver knows she's back to being the mother who'd lost her son to the North China Sea only to get him back, but not all of him. It was something she'd known the second she'd seen him all those months ago, he was sure of it. And now she's getting her confirmation that she only got *pieces* back… and that right now, he's starting to offer her some of those missing parts.

"I suppose," she says, her voice quiet. "That there's a lot we don't know about each other just yet."

"Yeah," Oliver replies softly. And then a wry smile pulls at his lips. "Like you believing in time travel?"

Moira hums in her own wry amusement. "Well, when you discover that there really might be a pit that can bring someone back from the dead, you start to believe in many things." He frowns at that - *what?* - but she continues, "I've been learning that the world isn't quite as it seems, Oliver. Like finding out my son has a daughter with a woman he's clearly never had a relationship with."

He can only blink.

Moira smiles. "Anyone can see you have feelings for her, Oliver, just as I've known for quite some time that she has feelings for you."

His heart catches - he knows that, he's always known that there was more for her, from the accidental flirting to the embarrassing rambles to the wandering eye she thinks he doesn't see… but actually *hearing* it is a very different thing.

He realizes a little too late that he doesn't even balk at her mentioning

his feelings for Felicity.

"And that little girl is clearly the product of a loving, healthy relationship," Moira says, absently brushing imaginary lint off his shirt. The wistful look is back, and her smile becomes gentle. "I always knew you'd be a wonderful father, Oliver, and that you'd find someone who brought out the best in you." She looks back at him. "I'm so grateful I got to see it."

… before she's gone.

Oliver's gut clenches painfully.

"Mom..." he whispers, his voice cracking and she shakes her head minutely.

"Focus on right now, Oliver," she says, nodding to the stairs. "Go be with your family. I'll be here in the morning."

Felicity's not sure how much time has passed before the sound of the door opening rouses both her and Ellie, nor does she realize what she's doing the second that she hears the knob turning - Felicity instinctively curls around her daughter, instantly moving to fend off the intruder before realizing who it is.

Ellie shifts with a quiet, "Daddy?"

"Sorry," Oliver responds, shutting the door behind him. Felicity frowns at the sound in his voice. She'd left the bathroom light on for illumination, but most of the space is lost in shadow so she can't see him, but she can definitely hear the roughness that wasn't there before.

"Oliver?" she asks, blinking the remnant sleep away, remembering Moira had asked him to stay downstairs for a second. It doesn't sound like it went well.

"It's okay," he whispers.

"You sure?" she responds, propping herself up on her elbow, her hand

finding Ellie's back as the toddler cuddles closer to her. Her eyes slowly adjust to the room and she finally sees him as he makes his way towards the bed.

"Yeah," Oliver says, and she sees him nod. "Are you two good?"

Felicity hums, fighting a yawn. "Yeah. We cleaned up a little, which was nice. And good." She stretches, exhaustion pulling at her as she fights another yawn. "I smelled like smoke, which is so not a great smell, and she was all smudgy from time travel. It seems like it'd be dirty, doesn't it? Traveling through *time*. Is time dusty? It sounds dusty. Or maybe that's just normal little kid dirtying up, I don't know, so I sort of…" She's aware she's babbling, but she's *tired* and thinking is too much work. Felicity doesn't miss the way Oliver's head tilts like it does when he's particularly amused by what she's saying as she continues, "Snuck across the hallway to see if there were clothes that didn't make us look like we were swimming, because your shirts are *huge*." Her eyes widen as she listens to herself. "Not that I was snooping, in your closet. I wasn't trying to snoop anywhere, actually, but we needed something clean and…"

"Felicity," Oliver says softly, cutting her off. He leans onto the bed, reaching like he's going to touch her but he stops short. She hears his quick inhale before he abruptly shifts his attention to Ellie. Felicity catches the bare glimpse of his smile as he lets his hand drift over her curls and the toddler lets out a particularly content sigh under his touch, falling into a deeper sleep. She feels his gaze on her again. "You can have whatever you need, Felicity."

The words, *'Including us?'* almost fall off her lips before she stops them.

Oliver pushes off the bed. "I'll just be a minute."

"Okay," Felicity replies, not moving as she watches him retreat into the bathroom. After a second, she relaxes again, settling back into the bed, her eyes never leaving the bathroom door. She readjusts enough that Ellie grunts in annoyance before pushing herself down just enough to get away from Felicity's moving limbs, sliding further under the comforter.

The strangest contentment fills her as Ellie's little body moves against her until she's comfortable again, twisting so her back is pressed into Felicity's stomach, and the feeling is only accented by the knowledge that Oliver is just a few feet away.

This is her family, she thinks sleepily, cradling Ellie closer. It feels so

right and perfect and *hers*.

It doesn't matter that there are so many questions lingering in the air, even more than before, about what happens, when it happens, and how… it doesn't matter, because in that moment, it's hers, and she *knows* it will be hers.

Somehow.

The gentle pull of sleep is tugging her under when she hears the bathroom door slip open, so quiet she barely catches it, but it's there. Oliver switches the light off, bathing the room in black, and she hears the shuffle of his feet on the tile before he hits the carpet and then… silence.

Felicity opens her eyes, blinking to clear them, trying to find him in the darkness… there he is. He's standing by the bathroom, and she can *feel* his hesitation. She fights the urge to move, to get up and tell him to just come over, to join them, because she knows this isn't a battle she can help him with - this is *his* battle, with himself, and while she'd seen a little glimpse of it earlier in the hallway, she knows she can't make this decision for him anymore than he can for her.

Does he know that she's already chosen this life, this life with him?

Felicity doesn't even remember *when* she made that decision - if it was the second she saw Ellie or the way Oliver responded to her, or later when she found her entire world revolving around the bundle of energy currently subdued in her arms - but it sits in her chest comfortably, perfectly… a warm, content weight of knowledge.

This is her life.

Does he want it too?

He does want it... or maybe he only *thinks* he wants it. He did just break up with Sara, and he did just find out that his mother is going to die before her time, and that he has a *daughter* with *her*, so maybe that's all clouding his judgment. Maybe he's thinking he *has* to want this life because it's already going to happen.

But it doesn't have to happen, does it?

Felicity's thoughts are spinning out of control and they only fall silent when she finally hears him moving.

But it's not to the bed, it's to the couch.

Right.

That was his selling point for sleeping in the same room together, that he had a couch in here, and that he wouldn't be sleeping in his bed… which she unilaterally took over.

Felicity's heart jumps slightly and she's about to sit up and tell him he doesn't have to sleep on the tiny sofa - or *couch*, as he'd call it; she would barely fit on that thing, much less her *and* Ellie, she's really curious to see how his huge frame would fold into it - when Ellie shifts for her.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?" Oliver answers automatically as he stops, turning back to the bed.

"Where're you going?" Ellie asks in a sleep-addled voice that tugs at Felicity's heart, and then her words catch up with her and her heart skips a few beats. She doesn't say anything, watching Oliver, feeling a stupid amount of gratitude for her future self because they obviously raise a child who isn't afraid to speak her mind when her mother is extremely tongue-tied.

"What do you mean?" Oliver asks.

"Are you going to bed too?" she continues, rolling her face against the mattress, her little legs kicking the comforter down a bit.

"Yeah," Oliver says, his voice tender, and she can hear it in the way he says, "I'll see you in the morning, okay?" that he wants to come over to her… to *them*.

But he doesn't. Felicity might be imagining things.

"Okay," Ellie says, scooting back right into Felicity with a surprising swiftness that makes her gasp. "Move back, momma, make room for daddy."

Felicity finds herself already scooting back before she can think twice just as Oliver protests, "No, sweetie, you guys stay on the bed." He takes a few steps towards them anyway before stopping himself. "I'm sleeping on the couch."

"No, daddy," Ellie says. "Get in."

"Ellie…"

"Did you do something bad?" Ellie interrupts and Felicity snorts, biting her lip to fend off a giggle at that. She can practically see Oliver's face as he processes their daughter's words, but Ellie doesn't give him a second to do so. "Did you bring home the wrong ice cream again?"

Felicity stiffens slightly, her mind jumping back to the picture Ellie had drawn, the picture of her and her very not-flat stomach...

"*He's got to stay in there until he's ready to come out. Even if you are ready for him to be on your outside already. It's not safe for him yet. He has to wait. Daddy says so."*

Oliver hadn't seen it yet.

"The wrong ice cream?" Oliver repeats, still not moving towards them. His voice is lighter though, like he's smiling. "When did I bring home the wrong ice cream?"

"When momma had a craving," Ellie explains. "She wanted brownie and you got mint."

"But she loves mint chocolate chip," Oliver replies, almost teasingly, and Felicity's heart takes a sudden nosedive. He remembered that?

She feels Ellie nodding against her. "The new baby doesn't though."

The air in the room freezes right along with Oliver as Felicity's heart stutters to a stop.

"The new baby?" he repeats faintly.

Felicity can feel his eyes on her, and she wonders if he can feel hers on him.

"Mhm," Ellie says. "Momma says it makes him cranky, which makes her cranky, which makes you cranky because everyone's cranky. But not me, I don't get cranky."

"Oh," is all Oliver can manage, so soft she barely hears him.

"Can daddy come back to bed, momma?" Ellie asks, turning to peer up at her through the dark. "He promises to get the right ice cream next time, right, daddy?"

Oliver's silent.

"He *promises*," Ellie reiterates.

"Well," Felicity says. "Okay… then. Yeah, of course he can come back to bed."

"Are you sure?" Oliver asks in a low voice, just for her ears as he takes a hesitant step towards her before stopping, like he *wants* to but he's fighting himself. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable or…"

"Oliver," Felicity says, scooting back, helping an enthusiastic Ellie pull the comforter back for him. "Trust me when I say that all the times I've imagined sharing a bed with you, it did not include a toddler, so I'm sure..." And then she flinches. "I said that out loud. I didn't mean to say that out loud." She catches the small smile on his lips, but he doesn't respond. He just climbs onto the bed and her heart suddenly starts clawing up her throat, her mouth running off without her, "I didn't mean to make *you* uncomfortable, because I just did, didn't I? I need a filter, someone needs to invent an actual filter that-"

"Felicity," he says, stopping her as he settles in, his tone surprisingly light. "You're fine."

"Oh sure, because talking about sleeping with you is a *fine* subject." *Again.* "*Actual* sleeping, not… the other kind of sleeping."

"Felicity, you don't…" But Ellie's already scooting closer to him, wrapping her tiny arm around his waist - he's positively gargantuan next to her, and it makes Felicity's heart sputter because she knows he will use every bit of it to protect her - tugging him onto his side. "Ellie, what are you doing?"

"Cocoon!" Ellie says with a grin. "Cocoon, daddy, come on!"

"Cocoon?" he repeats before Felicity interjects, "I think maybe we should save the cocoon for when we're all less dead on our feet, Ellie. Let's go to sleep, okay?"

"It *is* for sleep, momma," Ellie replies, exasperation coloring her tone and Felicity just blinks. "It's to keep us safe when we sleep."

"Safe from what?" Oliver asks, his tone turning a little graver.

"Monsters," Ellie says, like that explains it all. "Come on, momma, in more."

"Monsters? Like under your bed?" Felicity asks as she scoots in a little, but it's clearly not enough because Ellie spins in the contained space and wraps her arm around Felicity, pulling on her. "Oh, that close, okay…"

"All kinds of monsters," Ellie responds. "Daddy calls it Cocoon because we become a cocoon."

"He does, does he?"

"Yep." She pops the 'p'.

"Oliver," Felicity murmurs under her breath as she moves in closer. "I'm beginning to suspect you're a dorky dad."

"What?" he asks softly, like he doesn't know how to take that as his brow furrows. "Why?"

"Well, first the Ellie Kiss…" Felicity says as Ellie situates them.

Felicity is struck with how *easy* it is. Maybe it's because it's Ellie's there as a sort of future-daughter-buffer, but one second there's a good two feet between her and Oliver and suddenly all that space is *gone*, and it doesn't even feel *weird.* Alright, a little weird, but at the same time, it's *not*.

"And then the Ellie Cocoon." Felicity grins. "Those have dorky dad written all over them."

A slow beatific smile crosses Oliver's face as he processes that, his eyes never leaving hers - and *oh wow*, they're definitely close enough that she can see him *very* clearly now - before Ellie interrupts.

"It's not my cocoon, it's *our* cocoon."

"Oh?" Felicity asks, looking down at her where she's curled up between them.

"Daddy protects us while we sleep." That thing where Felicity's heart just *stops* happens again and her eyes fly back to Oliver, her heart jumping back to life when she sees his already on her. She can't read what she sees in his eyes, and she wonders if it's just the late hour, the extremely turbulent day and her entire lack of sleep making her see things… but there's *something* again, the same something from before. "You, me and the baby."

The baby.

Oliver's eyes darken slightly as Ellie talks and his gaze is like a tractor beam - even if Felicity wanted to look away, she couldn't because he's showing her more than he ever has before. There's *hope*, in his eyes, on his face, *hope* for something more, for Ellie, for them - for their future.

Felicity's mind goes blank, her chest suddenly feeling very, very full.

"There."

Ellie settles in, letting out a deep sigh that pushes her against both of them before she lets it out, falling still between them. Her back is pressed to Oliver's chest, her little limbs curled in against Felicity's. Her hand shoots out to tug the comforter in closer, literally cocooning her in-between them.

It takes Felicity far too long to realize just how close to Oliver she is. Their feet are *touching* - like her toes are on his *foot* - and they're practically sharing a pillow with how close their faces are. Is that his knee against her thigh or is that Ellie? And it wasn't nearly this hot when it'd just been her and Ellie - was that because Oliver was in there, or because she was rapidly becoming more and more aware of him as the seconds ticked by.

When she got up that morning, this was not how she thought her day was going to end.

At all.

"Night," the little girl slurs as sleep tugs her right back into its embrace.

"Goodnight," Felicity whispers as Oliver responds, "Goodnight, Ellie."

"Bug, daddy," she says, her words losing coherency. "Ellie-bug."

Surprised adoration and love flits across Oliver's face as he looks down at Ellie, whispering, "'Night, Ellie-bug." His face is soft with an emotion Felicity can't name as he leans down, pressing a soft kiss to the crown of her head, his hand coming up to cuddle her closer.

His fingers brush against Felicity's arms and a rush of affection floods her chest.

"Bug?" Felicity asks softly.

"My mom," Oliver says, his voice just as soft, his eyes still on their daughter, both of them feeling Ellie's breaths growing deeper as she falls asleep. "She used to call my sister Thea-bug when she was little, and for some reason Thea started calling me Ollie-bug." He shakes his head. "Wow."

Felicity nods, staring at him as he stares at Ellie, her chest growing tight. "Definitely wow."

Oliver looks up at her, and the world stops.

There's so much happening, so much going on around them - Slade, first and foremost, and what he has planned not only for Starling City but for Oliver, and then the fact that they just learned that not only do they get together in the future, but they have a *child* with another one on the way, and then learning about Moira's future, and what happened with Sara, and none of that even touches on the dangers from their future, the dangers after their child, and all of that topping the fact that they've now *learned* so much about their future, and what happens if that knowledge changes things for the worse?

It's a lot, almost too much...

But in that moment, it's just them, in a way that it's never been just *them* before where everything else melts away, fades into the background.

Oliver's hand moves, his fingers brushing against her arm again and her breath catches.

He hears it and pauses.

How many times has she dreamt of this? How many times has she thought about him touching her like this, of his own volition - not like the little touches he gives her, the ones of comfort and to make sure she's okay, but… like *this*.

Felicity leans in without even thinking, urging him on… and he keeps going, he keeps moving, keeps touching her, and it's *everything*.

His hand grazes her arm, making the tiny hairs stand up straight with awareness. A tiny shiver falls down her spine, all her attention on his fingers as they drag across her skin. It's both tender and… *enlightening*, like the mere fact that they're giving in like this is actually happening,

and they're both there for it, *both of them*. It's no longer just her, watching and silently wondering to herself about whimsical what-if's and fanciful daydreams.

He's here, with her.

It's an intoxicating thought.

Oliver watches her as he follows the line of her arm up to her shoulder. His touch is warm through her t-shirt where he stops, gauging her reaction, waiting… and then his thumb reaches out, the tip gently grazing her cheek.

Felicity licks her lips, unable to look away as he slowly moves to cup her cheek.

She can't breathe, she can't move, she can't… *do* anything but *feel* and *see* him because he's *right there*, so close - if she moved just a little, craned her neck towards him, scooted closer, she'd be able to taste him again, relive that little moment when they'd *kissed*, and wow, she's kissed Oliver Queen already and she...

She cannot believe this is happening.

"Oliver," she whispers, and he freezes. His eyes widen in alarm, slipping down to his hand like he didn't even realize it was there and she feels him pulling away from her - physically, mentally *and* emotionally; she can feel all of them and it's jarring. Felicity moves to cover his hand before she can think twice, pressing his palm back to her cheek. "No, wait."

"Felicity, I…" He frowns. "I didn't mean to…"

"No, wait." Felicity swallows, not sure what she wants to say but needing to say *something* because she needs to, she needs to *make sure*. "I don't… I don't want you to feel like you have to do this, or that you're… *obligated* because we know what happens now. Between us, I mean... I mean, Ellie's obviously not disappeared, she's still very here, which means we definitely still *have* her, together, but… but I don't want you to feel like you *have* to do this, to be here, or even like you have to… look at me like that, because it…" She closes her eyes as the gravity of what she's saying hits her. "If this is more for me than it is for you, Oliver, I won't…"

"Felicity," Oliver breathes, cutting her off as he shakes his head, a tiny smile on his face… and then he's leaning in, his hand gripping her face

tighter.

"Oliver…"

His lips brush against hers, swallowing the rest of her words.

Felicity inhales sharply, a quiet moan slipping out - his lips are soft, so incredibly soft; he tastes minty and like *Oliver*. How she just *knows* how he tastes is beyond her but she knows, and she wants more. His stubble is even more pronounced than it was before, even more evident as it scrapes and scratches at her, emphasizing the gentleness of his movements, of everything he's doing from his hand holding her tighter, his fingers skating over her ear, sliding through her hair as he kisses her.

It's *perfect* and Felicity sighs, melting into him as she kisses him back, threading her fingers through his where he holds her cheek.

They're both overly aware of the sleeping girl between them and it doesn't go anywhere past those few seconds where it's just *them*, where they taste and touch and feel each other - it's so little, but it's so *much* at the same time.

It's everything.

Oliver groans deep in his chest, barely audible, and Felicity opens for him, wanting to give him everything she possibly can right then and there.

When he pulls her bottom lip between his, a jolt of pleasure shoots through her, startling her - it's too much and not enough at the same time and Felicity pulls back with a rasped, "Oliver," but he's already moving back with a whispered, "I'm sorry."

"No… Oliver," she whimpers, shaking her head against him. She grabs him, pulling him back, pressing her lips to his again with a breathy whine of want that makes him grip her tighter, pulling her in closer, his lips moving more urgently.

Ellie shifting slightly shatters the moment.

They pull apart.

Her lungs burn with the need for oxygen as Oliver presses his forehead to hers.

Felicity stretches her fingers out across his cheek, overly aware of his harsh stubble as she moves her hand up into his hair.

Whoa.

"We should… talk," she whispers, looking at him. She's starkly aware of her lips, of where they'd just been, and her stomach plummets at the intensity in his eyes - this is *real*, this is really happening.

Oliver nods. "Yeah… but tomorrow." She furrows her brow and he whispers, "Felicity," before moving closer so his nose brushes against hers, making her eyes slip shut again. "So much happened and everything's… changing, I just…" He pulls back to look at her and she opens her eyes, meeting his. His hand cradling her face tightens. "We have tomorrow."

Felicity's eyes dance over his face, taking him in as he waits, and she knows he'll wait as long as she needs, but she doesn't need long, hearing what he's not saying.

"Okay," Felicity whispers.

Sleep.

Process.

Rest.

She doesn't know *how* she knows, but she does: she won't wake up tomorrow to find his mind changed. She doesn't know what that means exactly, what she can expect in the morning, what she *should* expect in the morning - if anything - but she believes it, with every inch of her being.

And for right now, it's enough.

They fall asleep wrapped around each other, their daughter cocooned between them.

Chapter 8

Sunlight engulfs Oliver when he wakes up.

It's everywhere, surrounding him, warming him in a way he hasn't felt in years. The tension that lives in every line of his body is gone, his muscles completely relaxed… He's *content*, enough that he doesn't instantly yank himself out of sleep like usually does, and for the first time in a long time, he doesn't want to move, not even a little bit.

Every inch of him is at ease as he takes a deep breath, smelling the sunshine of the yellow rays filtering across his face.

Oliver shifts, sinking deeper into its embrace...

Only it's not the sun.

It's Felicity.

All of it.

Oliver wakes a little more at that, shifting just enough to feel where he is… all he feels is *her*.

She's *everywhere*.

Somewhere in the night, he'd curled onto his side, spooning against her back, draping an arm across her waist to pull her close. She's flush against him now, her hand resting over his against her stomach, loose and just as at ease as he was, her soft, even breaths telling him she's still lost in her dreams…

There's nothing sexual about it, at all. Hell, there's nothing really even *sensual* about it. There's no suggestive movements or teasing touches. She's not sighing his name in her sleep or pressing herself against him in a delightfully uncomfortable way. Nothing untoward is happening, nothing that would make him - or her, specifically - blush or get that vicious adrenaline kick that makes his stomach twist.

But at the same time so much *is* happening. He's holding Felicity in his arms, and it strikes him how *normal* it feels. The rightness of this - the sense of peace it brings him, the content harmony that's settling in his chest like it's been there the entire time - it hits him like a ton of bricks.

It'd been in front of his face the entire time - *she'd* been there the entire time - and he'd almost missed this.

Oliver closes his eyes again, letting himself take a second, slowly pulling her a little closer. He presses his face against the back of her neck, nuzzling her soft skin, her silky hair, taking in a deep breath…

She smells like *home*.

He'd been so terrified of allowing himself the sort of happiness he's still not sure he deserves that he almost let this pass him by - hell, he'd pushed it away, not letting either of them stop to even *consider* it because the risk had been too great, the what-if's too impossible to overcome.

What if he's not enough for her? Or what if they take a chance and it all falls apart?

What if he loses her in his life?

What if Felicity gets hurt, or worse, *killed*, because of him?

That thought is still a heavy weight that settles deep in the pit of his stomach, one that makes him clench his teeth at the mere *possibility*… but now it's not the only thing he sees, not anymore. He's gotten a little taste of what it could be like, what he could have if he just *let* himself. He *wants* it, and he'd regret it if he didn't take that chance, something he obviously understands a great deal better in the future.

Felicity takes a deep breath, and Oliver feels her lungs expanding, her shirt shifting just enough that his pinky drifts over the thin strip of skin between her yoga pants and t-shirt. She's sleeping, completely relaxed and at ease, and that he's doing that for her just as much as she did it for him…

Oliver *wants* this.

He'd almost let this tranquil, domestic sense of *home* slide through his fingertips, and if Ellie hadn't shown up, he doesn't know how he…

Ellie.

She's gone.

A bolt of panic slams into his chest and Oliver sits up, somehow not waking Felicity as an urgent, "Ellie?" falls from his lips.

Nothing.

A cold chill slices down his spine, terror thrumming through his veins. He looks around the room, forcibly reminding himself to take steady breaths and not to jump to conclusions, telling himself he'd *know* if something had happened, if someone had been in there. *Slade*… no, he'd *know*.

But where is she?

The need to find her overrides every single thing in his head. He has to *protect* her. If he can't even keep her safe when she's asleep in his arms, then what chance does he have of keeping this kind of life? How can he even justify pursuing it?

He needs to keep her safe. He *needs* his little girl to be okay.

Only… what if he'd messed everything up? An ugly mixture of dread and horror fill his chest as his eyes fly around the room. She's not here. What if kissing Felicity, letting her see the most vulnerable parts of him, had somehow convinced her that he wasn't worth it? What if Ellie simply… *wasn't* anymore?

Oh god, no, no, not her, please not her. I'll do anything, please…

"Ellie?" he asks again, his voice rising.

"*Shhhhh*, daddy! Momma's sleeping!" chastises a little voice right before a tiny blonde head pops up over the back of the sofa.

Relief nearly bowls him over and he sags back into the bed, realizing only when he takes a breath just how fast his heart's beating.

"Ellie, what are you doing back there?" Oliver asks. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry, daddy," she says, deep concern coloring her voice at the notion of worrying him. "I was trying to play quietly. I didn't wanna wake the momma monster."

Oliver cocks his head, staring at her little guileless face before glancing back at Felicity's beautifully peaceful, still-sleeping form.

"Momma monster?" he asks with a little grin, tossing the comforter back, scooting out of bed.

"Mhmm," Ellie replies with a sure nod as Felicity moves slightly, her face crinkling at the loss of his warmth. Not waking, she scoots back

into the spot he'd occupied with a contented sigh. Something clenches in his chest and Oliver almost reaches out, his palm itching to smooth her wild hair, but he stops himself and instead pulls the comforter up again, tucking it around her.

When she still doesn't wake, Oliver pads across the floor quietly.

"Momma needs coffee or she's momma monster," Ellie says quietly with utter seriousness, watching him. "Lots of '*grrrr*.'"

Oliver stops a couple of feet away from her, pinching his lips together to keep from laughing out loud at the solemn lines on her face as much as the fact that she isn't exactly wrong. The few times he has seen it, Felicity is rather *unhappy* before she gets her coffee.

That thought makes him pause.

Do they do this often, in the future? Do he and Ellie wake up and wait for Felicity? Or do they make her coffee and sneak it in, trying to appease the momma monster? The name is something he knows would make Felicity laugh when she finally got some coffee in her system - he wouldn't be surprised if she coined it actually. He'd be too afraid to, having been at the mercy of her formidable wrath before. Which, now that he's thinking about it, probably happens way more when they get together.

He might be a dorky dad, but she's probably a dorky mom too.

God, he *wants* this.

Oliver glances at a clock. It's early. *Too* early, in fact, except for insomniac ex-castaway vigilantes and their toddler daughters, apparently.

"How 'bout we let her sleep a bit more and then we'll make her some coffee, okay?" Oliver suggests, crouching down next to Ellie.

"Can I pour the milk?" Ellie asks him hesitantly.

"Do I usually let you pour the milk?" he asks.

She sighs, little shoulders drooping and eyes downcast.

"No," Ellie admits, voice rueful and a bit downtrodden. "Sometimes it spills when I do it."

And *yeah*, he's a sucker because he's going to cave at this look on his

daughter's face every single time she wears it. And, if he's not mistaken, she already knows it too.

"Well…" he says, tugging on the end of one of her blond springy curls. "Maybe this one time it's okay."

Her heart-stopping little grin and bright happy eyes are going to be his downfall. He doesn't have a single doubt, and he's not even sorry. In fact, he *welcomes* it, because damn if that isn't absolutely the way he wants to go.

"Thanks, daddy," she says throwing herself at him for a hug. "I'll be careful. I promise. I'm a big girl now. I can do it."

His arms close around her instinctively. She's so tiny, a slip of a thing entirely dwarfed by his embrace, and he's hard-pressed to think if he's ever wanted to protect anything - *anyone* - more than her. He doubts it.

Oliver closes his eyes and savors the feeling of his little girl in his arms, only holding her tighter when she climbs into his lap. He kisses the top of her bedhead of blonde curls. It's an incredible feeling, this absolute faith and love being thrust on him. He's never felt anything like it in his life, and it's a trust he'll carry until the end of time, doing everything in his power to not let it break, not even once.

So what if she spills the milk, he doesn't care. It'll be worth it.

Ellie pulls back a little, still perched on his knee and smiling at him in that all-encompassing joyful way that only little kids ever seem to wear so fully.

"I'm going to pour the coffee though, okay?" he asks, stroking his fingers through her hair. "I don't want you to burn yourself."

"Okay," she agrees easily. "Is it time to make coffee now?"

"In a bit, Ellie-bug," he tells her without even thinking about the nickname.

Ellie beams at it though and he's grateful she pointed it out to him last night - it's probably a really good idea to give her that sense of normalcy. She's had an awful lot of change in the last day, and that has to be incredibly confusing for a preschool-age kid, even if she can't fully grasp it all.

Oliver wonders how much of this she *is* understanding, if she realizes that things are just a little off or if he and Felicity - their future selves - explained what was happening to her. Is that something he should ask her? Or would that upset her, highlighting that her entire world is different?

"Are we going home today?" Ellie asks.

Oliver stares at her, his mind instantly blanking on what to say. He's not sure if she's talking about the future, or if they live somewhere else, or… what.

Would he stay here with Felicity in the future? There's a part of him that says yes, because this was his childhood home, and especially if something happens to his mother… He hadn't even considered it possible, but thinking about his mother not being alive so soon in the future hurts even more than it did last night.

"Uh, well…" Oliver hedges.

"To our Queen Manor."

Oliver pauses. "*Our* Queen Manor?"

"Yeah. Gramma said this is Queen Manor, but we have one too."

He has no idea how to respond. His mind races through the possibilities of that - does something happen to this place, for them to call a new home Queen Manor? Do they sell this house, or… Isabel's smirking face suddenly surfaces in his mind's eye and he wonders if she has something to do with it. She's already taken the company, he highly doubts she'll stop there considering how intertwined all the Queen assets are.

Yet *another* thing to worry about. As if the threat of Slade hanging over them all isn't enough. They need the team to meet, figure out their next move, formulate some kind of a plan. They need to act before Slade does. But, he thinks as he glances back towards Felicity, they'll be better off well-rested when they do.

He pushes thoughts of Slade's vendetta and Isabel's machinations away for later. It's surprisingly easy to do with his daughter there to concentrate on.

"Probably not," Oliver replies, giving her a smile, one he hopes looks more reassuring than it feels. "Later, okay?"

"What can we do *now* then?" she asks, blinking up at him.

"Well, we could… uh…" he starts before drawing a total blank.

It's not like she has any toys there. And Oliver doubts very much that his mother saved any of his or Thea's from when they were little. *Maybe* his old train set, but even that would be tucked away in some dusty corner of the attic. He doesn't even have any kids books to read to her.

"We could… color?" he suggests, wondering if he sounds as unsure to her as he definitely sounds to himself.

Ellie sighs, fully unimpressed with this suggestion. Which, yeah... that was pretty much all she'd done yesterday. He can't blame her for wanting a bit of variety.

"Can I watch Rascal the Raccoon on TV?" she asks, perking up slightly. "Momma said there was a new one soon."

He has absolutely no knowledge of children's shows these days, but even *if* Rascal the Raccoon is something on television now, he's pretty certain it'll be one she's seen.

"It's not on right now, honey," he tells her instead.

"But momma makes it record on the TV," Ellie insists, looking way more troubled than is warranted, like he'd just informed her the entire thing was broken.

"Uncle Barry brought you to another time, remember?" Oliver tells her gently, studying her reaction. "Mommy hasn't recorded it here."

"Oh," Ellie says with a pout... and that's it.

It's the first time he's actively mentioned time travel to her and she brushes it off like it's nothing. He has no idea if it's because she's so used to it or because she simply can't grasp the concept.

"She should then," Ellie says definitively. "It's a great show."

Oliver fights the giant smile threatening to break his face at the surety in her tone as he nods, promising, "I'll make sure she knows that."

"Can I play on her computer?" Ellie asks, raising both eyebrows and biting her lip.

Not *the* computer, but *her* computer.

Oliver just blinks at her for a moment, soaking in the faked innocence cloaking her sweet little face. So *this* is what his daughter looks like when she's trying to get away with something. It reminds him very strongly of Thea, actually, and he files that little bit of knowledge away for the future.

"Mommy lets you do that, huh?" he asks, raising his eyebrows back at her.

"... Sometimes," Ellie counters in a quiet voice.

"Really?" Oliver prods with a grim line to his lips and a disbelieving gaze.

"Well… she got me my own tablet," Ellie admits, looking nervous at being caught in a half-lie - which already makes her an easier child than either him or Thea. "But since I don't have it, I thought maybe I could play games on hers?"

"Nice try," Oliver tells her, fighting back a grin as she deflates.

"So what *can* we do?" Ellie asks, big watery eyes looking up at him. "Don't we have *any* games here?"

"What were you doing before I woke up?"

"I was gonna make a castle," Ellie says.

"Because you're a princess?" Oliver ventures.

To his everlasting surprise, Ellie scoffs and rolls her eyes.

"Don't be silly, daddy," she says, shaking her head. "I'm not a princess. I'm president. That's way more important than a princess."

Sometimes she's so obviously Felicity's daughter that it pulls at something deep in the core of his being. She's an incredible little girl, smarter and more sure of herself than any toddler he's ever met. She's already so much her own person that he knows without a doubt she's going to be a handful when she gets older… but every time he sees that bit of her mother in her, shining through so clearly, it makes him love her all the more.

It makes him love *Felicity* all the more too, which isn't a thing he'd thought was possible up until yesterday.

"I didn't think presidents *had* castles," he tells her.

"Well, *I* do," she replies in an overly lofty tone, and it's no longer Thea before him but Moira. "Because I'm president and I said so."

"And congress signed off on you building a castle?" Oliver asks.

"I'm a very good president," Ellie confides. "They listen to me."

"I'm glad that's working out for you," he says, unable to hide his amusement.

"It is," she nods with supreme confidence. "Momma even says so."

"Well… if *mommy* says so," he allows, poorly smothering a grin with his fingers.

"She does," Ellie assures as if this makes the statement absolute truth.

To her, it probably does. It's not far off for Oliver either, if he's being honest.

"Well, how about I help you build your castle then?" he suggests, feigning looking around as he says, "I'm not sure where to find stones though…"

"Daddy!" Ellie giggles, slipping off his lap as she shakes her head. "Not a *real* castle. We just need pillows and a sheet."

"*Oh*," Oliver says, like she's thoroughly surprised him. "Well we do have those, don't we?"

"These are excellent castle cushions," Ellie tells him with a nod, looking toward the sofa, enunciating the word 'excellent' perfectly.

How often do they do this together? It's obviously not the first time. The idea that this might be a weekend ritual or something warms his chest.

"I guess I'd better find us a sheet then," Oliver proclaims.

"Good plan, daddy," Ellie says, and he takes a second to revel in her delightful acceptance of his 'plan' before standing, heading toward the bathroom's linen closet.

It's sort of ridiculous how much he's loving this, especially considering yesterday morning he'd woken up in the cold foundry, even more tired

than when he'd collapsed onto the cot at midnight - he hadn't been able to shut his mind off for even a few minutes. He'd jumped from trying to predict Slade's next move, wondering what else he should be doing to ensure nobody else fell victim to his vendetta against him, to having to play the part when it came to his mother's mayoral candidacy, smiling and pretending everything wasn't falling apart in his family, to the quiet deaths on the streets he wasn't there to stop, the people getting caught in the crossfire or falling victim to the darkness in his city, to what was happening to Roy, where he was, if he was okay, if he could save him, to how the company had slipped through his fingers and what that might mean for their assets, and to Thea, who was so *angry*…

But the look of happiness on Ellie's face makes all of it worthwhile, makes the burden on his shoulders *lighter*.

He tries to imagine what any of the men the Arrow has taken down would make of the vigilante spending his morning making a pillow fort and he finds he can't. It's practically unimaginable. But maybe that's what makes it so great. Somehow… someday, he finds a way to be something else, to be someone else, someone other than just the city's would-be savior. He figures out how to be a husband and a father, the kind of man who takes his family on vacation and cocoons them in his arms and plays make-believe with his toddler. How he manages that balance, he has no idea, but the very notion that it's possible is heady.

It hits him that he still doesn't know if he and Felicity are married in this future. His gut tells him yes, because there's no way he'd not seal the deal, especially if they have another child on the way.

Another child.

Wow.

"This okay?" he asks, his voice cracking slightly with an emotion he can't name as he heads back with two gunmetal gray sets of sheets in his hands.

"Yep!" Ellie confirms, scurrying around and propping sofa cushions up with a determined look and a steady hand. "But I need your help."

"Okay, well, you're way more experienced at pillow forts than me so I'm going to follow your direction, President Ellie."

She nods like this is fully expected.

"It's science," Ellie informs him. "Momma says so."

That is kind of true, he supposes. There's gravity and balance and tension and… okay, if Felicity turns pillow forts into a basic science lesson for their daughter he's going to be fully behind that, but it's also been a solid thirteen years since he's built a pillow fort and he's sorely out of practice.

"I used to do this with your Aunt Thea, you know," he says, tucking the sheet under the feet at the back of the sofa.

"I know," Ellie tells him. "She's an excellent castle-maker, too."

He stops what he's doing and looks back at Ellie, who's busy tucking the other end of the sheet under his mattress, being very careful to not jostle the bed enough to wake Felicity. Oh yes, they've definitely done this often.

"You do this with Thea?"

"Yeah," Ellie says, looking back at him like this is obvious, like this is nothing. "Whenever I stay over with her and Uncle Roy we build a giant castle in the living room. It's fun. I make Uncle Roy be the dragon."

For some reason, that hits him on another level entirely. This is *real.* It was always *real* - he knew it was real the second he held her in his arms - but hearing about her doing something as innocuous as building pillow forts with his sister… it's throwing him. She's *real*, and at some point in the not-too-distant future, she's a staple in all of their lives. Somewhere, in the next few years, she's actually building pillow forts with Thea, like he used to do.

It makes him want to cling on to this version of his future even more.

So he does.

Oliver works quietly with Ellie, tucking edges of the sheet in all the appropriate places to make a little fort, a castle - Ellie's castle. Joy fills him as he builds a silly little tent with his daughter and he knows that no matter what else might happen - if she disappears in an instant or stays with them for years - he knows he'll remember this.

When it's done, Oliver stands back to survey their work, but Ellie suddenly grabs his arm, tugging him in with her. "Quick! Get in before the momma monster wakes up and attacks!"

There is no one - vigilante or not - who would ignore that sort of demand. And, without even thinking, Oliver's diving into the tent with Ellie.

There's a weird sort of glow of diffused light filtering through the sheet as the two of them huddle together and Ellie presses a finger over her lips, looking around like she's waiting for something to happen. Oliver nods at her silent command, listening too, sitting stock-still, awaiting her instruction. It would be completely absurd if he weren't so incredibly entranced.

After a moment, he whispers, "What are we waiting for?"

"As president, I say we have to be quiet," Ellie reminds him with tremendous intensity.

"Oh," Oliver replies, just as intensely. "Okay then."

Possibly she's inherited the Dearden line a little more than he'd thought, because he falls fully silent, nodding along in agreement.

Ellie's all seriousness as she reminds him, "The monster is *out there*, daddy."

"Right." He pauses, but after a moment when it becomes clear she isn't going to immediately say anything else, he asks, "So we're hiding?"

"Of course not," she scoffs, looking at him like he's crazy. "We're waiting for the right moment to strike back."

Oliver can't hide his breathy chuckle at that. She's definitely his daughter too, isn't she?

"Well, maybe we need to draw it out," Oliver suggests.

Ellie cocks her head, blonde springy curls bouncing to the side as she looks at him speculatively.

"How?" she asks.

"I think…" he says, scooting closer and bending down so that he's on her level, "that monsters are drawn to laughing."

"Laughing?" she asks, eyes narrowing at him in suspicion.

"Like, say… if someone were tickled."

Her eyes go wide and her little mouth makes a circle as she blinks at him.

"Daddy, *no*." She shakes her head, but she's already grinning. "The monster will come!"

"That's the idea!" he reminds her and then he grabs her, tickling her sides.

Ellie squeals, twisting in his arms, laughing uproariously as she throws herself away from his assault. It's only his well-honed reflexes that keep her from tumbling backwards as his fingers tease her armpits, leaving her giggling breathlessly, managing a, "Daddy… stop!" before it's drowned out in more laughter.

He can't help but chuckle along as she wriggles around, trying to push him back just as much as she tries to crawl away, but he doesn't let her.

"Daddy!" she protests half-heartedly, her little hands pushing on his fingers and he stops, pulling her back into his lap.

There's a rustle of fabric nearby and Ellie's eyes go wide at the sound.

"Do you think it worked?" Oliver asks her, tweaking her nose.

She's still catching her breath, wide eyes on the sheet as she sagely says, "You are very silly to try to wake momma monster without coffee, daddy."

Normally, he'd agree. But this is as new to Felicity as it is to him and he knows with absolute certainty that she'll be as spellbound by Ellie as he is. She doesn't need coffee to wake her up, not today.

Ellie is earth-shattering enough all on her own.

"What's all this?" Felicity asks tiredly before poking her sleep-creased face under the sheet. Every instinct Oliver has is telling him to drag her under the sheet with them and hold her close, but he doesn't. He just smiles softly as she eases down on the floor, looking around at their fort.

"Eep!" Ellie shrieks, jittering in his arms. "Daddy, it worked! The momma monster is attacking!"

"Are you sure?" Oliver asks, his smile growing as he stares at the

'momma monster' in all her beautiful glory. "It looks less like an attack and more like a 'good morning' to me."

Felicity yawns as he talks, ducking under the sheet to crawl in with them. Her jaw cracks and she shudders against the strain of her muscles trying desperately to wake up and she's so unbelievably cute and sexy at the same time, it takes everything Oliver has not to pull her into his arms and kiss her. He *wants* to - god, he wants to - not that that's anything new. As he watches her get situated, he lets himself think about that. He's wanted to hold her, to kiss her, for a long time, a lot longer than just the last few hours. It was never on the table, he'd never considered it, but now…

"You sleep okay?" he asks her, his voice soft and gentle, his hand settling on hers before he realizes what he's doing. When he does, he doesn't move it.

"Mmm," Felicity agrees, leaning over to kiss Ellie's temple, who leans into it as she scrunches up her nose. "I slept great and then I woke up to laughter, which is way better than an alarm clock. Even if the alarm clock was programmed to sound like laughter. I feel like that wouldn't be the same, you know?" She yawns again, nodding, talking through it, "This is better, much better."

It might be on the verge of a typical Felicity-babble, but - like most of them - it's honest. She's right. You can't bottle this kind of happiness, but that doesn't mean he doesn't wish he could. He's never felt anything like this - it bubbles in his veins like fine champagne, leaving him giddy and *happy*, and it's been so long since he's felt this that he can't get over how much he'd forgotten what it felt like in the first place.

"Definitely better," Oliver whispers, staring at her.

She turns to him, still half-asleep, with a muted, "Hmm?"

He just shakes his head with a soft smile. "Nothing."

Oliver knows she's waking up because she tilts her head, furrowing her brow, hearing more than what he's saying, in that Felicity way that she's always had. He's never been able to keep things from her, even when he sincerely tried, because she knows him too well. She always has.

And as the silence stretches between them, he knows she's seeing everything he's not saying.

Felicity doesn't move her hand, but her thumb shifts, almost like she's testing the waters. When he doesn't move, doesn't do anything but let her lead, she lets her fingers slide between his. A thin sheen of apprehension fills her eyes as she searches his. Oliver doesn't blink, doesn't look away. Instead he holds her stare, lets it wash over him, lets her presence wash over him.

She opens her mouth, taking a deep breath to speak, when Ellie interrupts.

"Are you ready for coffee, momma?"

"What?" Felicity asks, blinking at her.

"Coffee," Ellie says again. "Daddy said I could pour the milk because I'm a big girl."

"You are," Felicity agrees nodding. "Very big. Shockingly so, actually. Did you grow overnight?" She reaches over with her free hand - she doesn't let his hand go and he fights the urge to pull her closer again as she picks up one of Ellie's legs to check its length. "These look longer." Ellie makes a series of squeaky noises that dissolve into giggles when Felicity's fingers drift near her toes, making Oliver chuckle. "Did you get you taller? Maybe we should get you a job as a barista."

"Momma!" Ellie laughs, shaking her head. "You're silly."

"Maybe a little," Felicity agrees, smiling down at the girl with bright eyes, as Oliver smiles at her.

He knows full well in that moment that either one of them would happily make themselves look like a fool just to hear the sound of their little girl's laughter, just to see joy spread across the expanse of her tiny face. They'd both do *anything* for her, and they clearly do, considering where she is right now.

He's *transfixed.*

The adoration is evident on Felicity's face, her hand warm in his. Their daughter's chattering voice fills the tiny space, forcing Felicity's lips to pucker in a little 'o' shape as she responds, and his eyes drop to her mouth…

He kissed those lips last night. It'd been so involuntary, almost rash, but hearing her tentative words, her trying to give him an out just in

case, that she was afraid it was all on her side and she didn't want him to feel like he had to do something just because they *know* about Ellie, about their future… he couldn't have stopped himself even if he'd wanted to, because that was *so* not what he was doing.

He didn't want to push her, he didn't want to do anything too soon, or make her uncomfortable, or make her feel like *she* had to do something she didn't want to…

Her fears are his fears, and as he watches her talk to Ellie, stares at her bedraggled hair, the oversized shirt starting to slip off her naked shoulder, the creases along her jaw from the pillow, her glasses sitting slightly askew on her nose. It's all a sharp contrast to the vivid light in her every move, her bright blue eyes, her gorgeous grin as Ellie describes about how he helped build the fort.

She *wants* this, he can see it, she wants it every bit as much as he does.

"Felicity."

She looks at him just as a tentative knock raps on their door, cutting him off.

Oliver knows without even asking who it is.

"You can come in, mom," he calls out as Ellie scrabbles for the edge of the sheet, peeking around it.

Whether it's the imminent presence of his mother or just the outside world creeping in, Oliver isn't sure, but Felicity starts to pull her hand away from his. It's not a sudden jolt - it's not like she's a teenager caught in a compromising position - but her fingers ease away from his anyhow and he doesn't like it, he doesn't like that she feels like she needs to pulls away.

It feels *wrong*, given this new reality they've woken to...

So his fingers chase hers.

Oliver slips his hand into hers and she looks at him with blatant surprise… and then her brow furrows with hesitant hopefulness. He smiles, a tiny quick turn of his lips, but it's *real*, and she sees it as he meets her gaze.

There's nothing to hide here, not anymore. There never really was, except for when it came to his feelings for her. But now, now there's

no reason to hide them and he lets her see *everything*.

The connection between them is fresh and raw - *naked*. It should be a big, scary thing, but it's not.

"Oh my…" Moira says from outside their tent. "It's been a long time since there's been a fort in this house."

Oliver doesn't miss the note of wistful longing in her voice.

"It's a castle," Ellie corrects, lying on her stomach with her head poked through the sheet and her bare feet kicking up in the air right next to Felicity.

"My apologies," Moira offers up, all typical regal grace and propriety.

"It's okay," Ellie tells her with a long-suffering sigh. "Daddy made the same mistake."

"Hey, mom," Oliver says, lifting up the corner of the sheet at that to look up at his mother from where he and Felicity are sitting cross-legged under the makeshift tent. He still doesn't let go of her hand, though she tenses like maybe she's expecting him to and he can feel her eyes still focused on him. He's so far past forcing distance between them at this point, he can barely remember what it was like to do it just a mere day ago.

"Good morning, Oliver," Moira says, leaning down to peek inside. Felicity starts to tug on his hand again but he doesn't let go and he definitely doesn't miss Moira noticing their intertwined fingers. "Good morning, Felicity."

"Uh, hi," Felicity says, running her hand through her hair. Oliver has to bite his tongue to keep the, '*You're beautiful,'* from rolling off his lips, but not because it's not his place. More because it's just for them, and it's definitely not just them right now.

"I thought perhaps I might see if Ellie would like some waffles," Moira offers up.

"With strawberries?"

It's both Ellie and Oliver who answer, their tones ridiculously similar, full of hope and cautious optimism, recognizing what an awesome treat it was when they got strawberries with their waffles.

Oliver doesn't miss the amused little sound that falls from Felicity's lips.

His reaction is completely involuntary and he knows damn well that his level of excitement over the prospect of his mother's strawberry waffles is better suited for someone his daughter's age, but *no one* makes strawberry waffles like Moira Queen. They also happen to still be his favorite breakfast indulgence, even though he can't remember the last time she made them.

Years, it's been *years*.

He's not even a little bit sorry for the childish thrill of anticipation that rolls through him, especially when he sees the look on his mother's face - she's reached the same realization he has about how long it's been since she's made those waffles, and it strikes him how much younger she suddenly looks.

"I think I can manage that," Moira answers, delighted affection dancing in her eyes as she looks from Oliver to Ellie and shakes her head before stretching out a hand. "I thought you might like to help, Ellie?"

"Can I?" Ellie asks, practically vibrating with excitement as she looks back at Felicity. "Can I please, momma?"

"Sure," Felicity says easily. She glances towards Oliver as she speaks. "We'll join you in a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay!" Ellie chirps, clambering to her feet and taking Moira's hand. "Can there be whipped cream, gramma?"

Oliver's heart trips all over itself at that, the sound of his daughter calling his mother 'gramma,' but it doesn't seem to faze his mom even a little. She just smiles down at Ellie with a patiently maternal sort of look he hasn't seen since he was a kid. She says something in response as the two of them make their way out of the room, though he's got no idea what as he watches them, *together* - his mom and his daughter.

This is the only time he'll have this.

Now.

By the time Ellie comes into their lives, his mother is long gone.

His shoulders fall as Moira closes the door behind her.

He's not sure how he's supposed to deal with that…

"Your mother just saw me in my pajamas."

… and just as quickly, Felicity grounds him.

There's a slightly hysterical note to her voice that Oliver suspects has a whole lot more to do with the summation of everything that's happened in the last day than it does with his mother.

Probably.

"I doubt she even noticed," Oliver tells her, letting the sheet drop back down, cocooning them in the tent together. "And she definitely didn't care."

"*Please*," Felicity scoffs, self-consciously tucking her impressively frizzy hair behind her ear. "Your mother has been perfectly coiffed every day of her life. She probably wakes up looking like that. Little pixies do her hair and makeup in her sleep or something." Her eyes widen. "Oh *god*, I'm not wearing makeup!"

"You're not…?" Oliver stops for a split second, blinking - *that's* what she's worried about? He snorts, the sound disappearing in a short laugh as he shakes his head. "Felicity, you're being ridiculous."

"I am *not* being ridiculous, Oliver," she chastises. He snorts again and she narrows her eyes. "I'm *not*, I'm being serious here." She furrows her brow, her lips jutting out in a tiny pout that makes her look far more endearing than should be allowed and he grins, because *he can't help it*. "This is my future mother-in-law we're talking about and she's silently judging me as we speak, a little sympathy would…"

Oliver freezes. He sees the moment her words catch up with her and a cornered look of horror washes over her face, her skin turning ashy.

"I didn't mean… that we…" Felicity shakes her head, trying to take her hand back *again*, but he's still not letting her go. "I'm not saying…"

"Yes, you did," he interrupts.

That stops her.

"You did mean it," Oliver repeats, pulling her hand up. He doesn't know what he's doing until he's pressing his lips to her knuckles, kissing them softly, quietly savoring the way her breath catches - both

in surprise and something else that makes his stomach clench. "And that's okay."

"Oliver…"

"We're not… *there*," he acknowledges.

"Oh god, not even by a longshot," Felicity manages, her eyes on his lips where they're resting on her hand. There's a slight tremor running along the edge of her fingers, but when he looks, he finds a smile on her lips, one that's the complete antithesis to the reluctance in her eyes. "Oliver…"

"But we have every reason to believe we're on our way."

"That's…" Felicity starts, but her voice trails off as she clearly has no idea how to finish whatever it was she'd started to say. "Oliver…"

"This is all new," he says, the words holding the same weight as what he'd said the night before. "And a bit overwhelming." *That might be the understatement of the year.* "But I'd say we're both handling it pretty well."

"You mean… being parents to a bouncing three-year-old?" she asks, her eyes searching his face.

"And us, being... *us*," he adds.

"Us?" she asks, sounding like she's sure she heard him wrong. "So there is… an 'us'?"

"Felicity…" he says, shaking his head and huffing out a quick breath. "I think we both know there's been an 'us' for a whole lot longer than we were ready to admit."

"No." She shakes her head and his heart drops for a moment until she continues, waving her hand between them. "No, *we* did not know that. Half of 'we' thought she had an embarrassing, horribly inappropriate, one-sided crush from hell that just wouldn't die."

"It was never one-sided," he says.

Felicity's already shaking her head. "But you… and we…"

She blinks rapidly, her unpainted lips parted in a look of surprise that makes him want to kiss her just to prove a point. He doesn't though. He listens, just like he said he would last night, because this is

definitely something they need to talk about, especially if they're going to move forward.

"But you never said anything!" Felicity blurts. "I mean, there was last night… but does that count?"

Oliver frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are someone who sees something in front of him and… doesn't see it… no, that's not what I mean. Or maybe it is what I mean, I don't know, I can't think because this is… a lot." Felicity closes her eyes. He can practically hear the wheels turning in her head, and it takes everything in him to sit still, to *wait*. When she finally opens her eyes, they're clear… and full of questions. "Oliver, if there's been an 'us' this entire time, why now, if not…?"

"No," Oliver says, shaking his head, hearing what she's not saying. "Felicity…"

"And what about *Sara*… and Helena and McKenna and *Laurel*. Oh my god, *Laurel*. Oliver, this is *crazy*. You've been in love with Laurel for, like, *ever*. If there's someone you're supposed to be all 'happily ever after' with, it's her. Not *me*… even though we do, apparently, it's still-"

"I'm not in love with Laurel," Oliver interrupts, feeling the truth of that in a way that seems more final than it ever has before. "I haven't been for a very long time."

"Oliver," Felicity says, shaking her head like it's the only thing she can do. "I was here, I saw you. I saw what you went through these last few years. I saw all the… women, in your life - and while it probably doesn't match your pre-island quota, there were definitely quite a few - all with Laurel being like this… this..." She waved her hand, struggling to find the right word. "Ghost or something, always there. And then *Sara*…"

"I love Sara," Oliver interjects, and her jaw snaps shut. He can *see* the dread filling her eyes and he says, "But I wasn't *in* love with her. I don't think I've *ever* been in love with Sara. I was… I was with her because it was easy, because she's like me… because I didn't have to worry about her getting hurt or killed just because she was with me."

"Oliver," Felicity starts, but he doesn't give her the chance.

"Sara knows me, but not… she knows me in a way that makes everything easier, because I don't have to open up certain parts of

myself when I'm with her. I can be me… without really letting her in…"

Felicity stares at him, her face unreadable, as his own words start sinking in.

"I was with her because it was *safe*."

The truth of what he's saying slams into him.

Inevitable.

Sara knew.

She'd called their breakup inevitable… because it had been, since the beginning, since she'd come back. *He* was the one who'd gone in with blinders on. She'd known exactly what they'd had and exactly how it was going to end, because the exact same reason he was with her was why she was with him.

He wasn't *risking* anything with Sara, not like he would be with Felicity - and god, he'd be risking so much with her, he'd be risking *everything*… but it'd be *worth* it. There is physical proof that it's worth it in the form of their daughter downstairs making strawberry waffles with her grandmother.

It's worth it.

"I think you're confused," Felicity says, trying to pull her hand away from his. "Or maybe you hit your head when you were fighting Slade and now you're suffering from short-term amnesia." Her voice wavers. "A lot has changed, just like you said last night, and you're going into shock because if you think I'm going to believe you're over Sara that quickly - if you're over *Laurel* that quickly…"

She tugs on her hand again and he whispers, "Felicity," before reluctantly letting her go, his fingers instantly itching to take it back.

"You're *confused*," she reiterates, lacing her fingers together in a tight group. "And it's understandable, because hi, major life change in the form of a three-year-old, but…"

"I'm not confused," Oliver counters, raising his voice over hers. He goes on before she can continue. "I… I have clung to the idea of Laurel for a really long time. A *really* long time. Her picture in my pocket gave me the drive to survive on the island, a drive I *needed* there."

Felicity's quiet, letting him speak - he's never talked about this, not with anyone; the last person he talked to about that damn picture was Slade, ironically enough. He finds himself wanting to go on, to say more, to explain more, and he's not sure if he's saying it for her or for him anymore.

"But… even before I wound up on Lian Yu, I don't know that what we had was love." Oliver stares at her, willing her to *see* what he's saying. "It definitely wasn't at the end. I was… *fixated*, when I got back, yes, but for all the wrong reasons, something I had to learn the hard way." He pauses, searching for the right words. "Sometimes… sometimes it's harder to let go of the idea of someone than it is to let go of the actual person."

Felicity bites her lip as she looks at him, wariness lining her eyes, her body tense like she's bracing for some kind of letdown, like he just confirmed everything she's been saying. She shifts, her hands falling to her sides, and he knows it will take one push and she'll be up on her feet and away from him… but she doesn't move, and that gives him hope just as much as it reassures him, because he's not going to give her a reason to leave. He's not going to do that to her, not now, not ever again.

He has to *show* her that… but how?

Say it.

She needs *more*. She needs more than just reassurances that he's not in love with Laurel, or Sara, that he's not just here because of Ellie. She needs some reason to believe he could fall in love with her… some inkling of the notion that he's already more than halfway there.

"Coming back home was like living in a fog," Oliver says, reaching out his hand. He doesn't take hers, but he rests beside it, letting his fingers brush against hers, still giving her space to move away if she wants to. "For so long, I couldn't trust anyone, I couldn't rely on anyone, for anything, and... when that goes on, for so long, you stop seeing people for… *people*. They became… threats. Or targets. And when I decided to come home, I didn't… I didn't know how to turn that part of me off… But then I met you." She inhales sharply and he moves a little closer, letting his hand touch hers more fully. She doesn't move away from him. "You were the first person I could see as a… person. There was just something about you, and… and you made me *laugh*, Felicity. I'd forgotten what that had even sounded like. At that point, I wasn't sure I could be anything other than the Hood. But *you*… Felicity, the

Hood may have come back on his own to Starling, but you're the one who brought *me* back."

She's quiet for a moment, scarcely breathing. Surprise plays across her face as she searches his eyes for any indication that this isn't real, that she's heard him wrong… but she won't find it. He means every single word he's said. He means them with every ounce of his being.

"Why… why didn't you say anything?" Felicity asks, voice breaking a little as her fingers tangle with his again. The slight movement has his heart soaring as her eyes keep searching his.

"I didn't think I had room in my life for being with someone I'd want a future with," he reminds her, echoing back to that awful talk after they'd come home from Russia. "Obviously… I was wrong."

They're sitting cross-legged on the floor of his room inside a tent of sheets and cushions that their daughter from the future made and he's completely poured his heart out to her in a way he never really thought he would… and it suddenly occurs to him that he's *terrified*. It's all on her now. He just handed her his heart, completely unhindered, and all it will take is a simple yes or no to decide what happens next.

Oliver waits, for something, for *anything*.

Felicity just stares at him silently, letting his words soak in. His heart's beating so loudly he probably wouldn't hear anything she says anyway; it's so loud he's surprised she can't hear it.

She doesn't say anything, and the silence starts to become deafening, growing heavier with each passing second.

Her eyes are too much for him - piercing and strikingly blue, eyes he wants to wake up next to every day for the rest of his life… he's *letting* himself want that, and it's making the silence even heavier. Oliver looks down at their hands instead. They're tangled together the way they should be; they're warm and soft and it takes him a moment to realize that she's not pulling away.

Still, she's quiet… and Felicity's never quiet.

But she's not pulling away.

It takes him a few seconds longer than it should to realize her other hand is moving and when he does, he jumps. His attention snaps back

to her with a sudden rush of desperate hope welling in his gut, half-afraid of what he'll find but even more afraid to not look.

His sudden movement makes her pause, her fingers hovering next to his face, and Oliver nods, barely moving, just enough for her to see.

Felicity touches his cheek.

She's hesitant. He can read it all over her, but there's a new vulnerability that wasn't there before. She's searching his eyes for something, and he wonders if she finds it… and maybe she does because he sees the resolve slipping over her beautiful face when she makes her decision. He can *see* the moment where she does, and Oliver lets out a breath he didn't even realize he'd been holding, a smile tugging at his lips.

She smiles, like it's a natural reaction to his as her gaze drifts down to his mouth… and then she's leaning in closer.

Oliver's heart jumps to life. She's near enough that they're sharing air, that her nose is brushing against his. He shudders out a little gasp, moving to cup her face, his hand trembling slightly, but he doesn't *care*. Felicity is damned near in his lap, all his cards are on the table in a way they never have been before - everything, he's shown her *everything* - and she's not running away.

He honestly has no idea how he got so lucky.

"Felicity," he murmurs with a breathless sigh, nuzzling his nose against hers and savoring her sharp intake of air as their lips brush against each other.

He wants to pull her fully onto his lap, he wants to kiss her with all of the passion and affection that his words can't quite express, but this has to be *her* choice. He already took that away from her last night when he kissed her, and while he knows she wants this - if it's him, or Ellie, or the entire picture, he's not sure just yet - he isn't about to take that choice away from her.

He can't - *he won't* - and he'll wait until she…

Felicity kisses him.

Oliver's mind blanks as she presses her lips against his, abruptly moving closer the second they touch.

He's vaguely aware that she's pressed up against him now, that he can *feel* her, and that she feels *amazing*, just as good and warm and *perfect* as he'd always imagined. They both definitely have a slight case of morning breath and they should probably go downstairs where their daughter and his mother are waiting for them and they have a laundry list of issues long enough to cover the expanse of his room that they need to deal with - personal and emotional, sure, but also including the fact that a madman from his past is intent on burning everything to the ground. None of that matters at the moment. Because right now, he just doesn't *care*.

Because it's just this. It's just them.

Oliver moans just as Felicity lets out a tremulous sigh against his lips.

They move at the same time.

Felicity pushes herself closer, up onto her knees so she's hovering over him, her hands cupping his face, her tongue running along his bottom lip with a breathy gasp that he feels in his bones.

He's floating. There's no other way to describe it. The second she'd touched his cheek, the second she'd looked into his eyes, when he'd *known* she was there with him, it was like everything clicked into place. He's kissing her, this woman he'd never let himself think about, the woman he'd always had to look at from afar, who he told himself he could never have… she's there, with him, and it's more than he could have ever imagined.

She's close, but she's not close enough, and his hands drop down to her hips, his fingers grazing along her gentle curves. Oliver leans into her, pressing himself closer to her, but he needs *more*.

Before he can think twice, he pulls her into his lap, tugging her flush against him. Felicity gives him a soft whimper as she straddles him and Oliver swallows the little sound, cradling her in his arms, kissing her with a slow-growing urgency that's making their confined space very, very hot.

Her hands are in his hair, her nails scraping against his scalp, her strong legs wrapping around his waist. He holds her tighter, seeking the warmth of her embrace just as much as he wants to hold her in his.

It's too fast. He knows this - *he knows it* - but he doesn't want to stop. It's everything he's dreamt about, thought about, wondered about…

all the things he *couldn't* have, but now he *can*. It's all right here and he can't help but take what she's offering, because it's *Felicity*. He wants her. He wants the life he's going to have with her. He wants their daughter and their future - he wants it *all*.

That thought echoes the fact that she's *right there* with him, meeting him every step of the way, and the intensity of it is too much. Oliver pulls away for a second, gasping for air, every inch of him on fire with awareness as he leans into her. Her lips graze his forehead - she's breathing just as hard as he is, and her heart's pounding. He can *feel* it, echoing his, just as he can feel her trembling.

"Oliver…"

She's so warm and soft and *perfect*… He's never felt this way with someone, not in his entire life, and they've barely been doing anything for more than a minute.

Is it because he's wanted this for so long or is this how it will always be with her?

"This is…" she starts, fighting for air.

He nods with a barely audible, "Yeah."

They don't move, taking a second, and… and then she settles deeper in his lap, shifting her legs to sink down against him, and he can't help himself. He doesn't *want* to. With a needy groan, Oliver turns his face back up to hers blindly, his hands sliding up her back, one slipping up under her shirt.

Felicity's right there with him, her lips seeking his.

Oliver kisses her, delighting in her little moan as his hand spans the width of her naked back. She wraps her arms around his shoulders, holding him as close as she can, opening for him, giving him everything he could want from her.

Just as he whispers, "God, Felicity," with every intention of taking her invitation, he hears the hinge on the door whine slightly.

They barely have time to rip themselves away from the other before Ellie pulls the sheet up.

"Gramma told me to tell you that the first batch of waffles is almost done!"

"Oh, okay, alright," Felicity says, pushing her hands through her hair as she nods, smiling at their daughter. Oliver adjusts slightly, just enough to hide his growing, er… problem. "Mommy and daddy will be down in a minute, okay, sweetie?"

"Okay, but you have to hurry because she said there aren't a lot of strawberries and that if you guys want waffles *with* strawberries, you need to come and get them right now," Ellie says.

"Oh, well then, we better get down there," Felicity responds before sliding a look to Oliver. "Something tells me Moira's Moiraness is hereditary."

Oliver huffs out a chuckle.

"And she's making them just like you do, daddy!" Ellie continues, her eyes bright.

"Oh yeah?" he asks, feeling a tug in his chest at the thought that he makes his daughter the waffles his mother makes him, of sharing that with her.

Ellie nods with a grin before spinning away, letting the sheet fall back down. They listen to the quiet patter of her feet slowly disappearing.

Neither of them move.

"Well, that just happened," Felicity says, a nervous trill in her voice. She nods, furrowing her brow, moving towards the sheet. "I'll just…"

Oliver doesn't let her finish - he grabs her, pulling her flush against him again, his lips finding hers.

It's a heart-stopping mixture of the sweet, gentle kiss from last night and the passionate one they'd just shared, and it makes every inch of him stand at attention just as much as it settles something deep inside.

When they pull back, they're both breathless.

"I'm glad it did," Oliver says.

"Hmm?" Felicity asks, her eyes still closed, and he grins, pushing his hands through her hair. She shivers in response, biting her bottom lip lightly and he makes a mental note of that before kissing her again.

And again.

He doesn't want to stop, he never wants to stop.

"Waffles," Felicity whispers, and he hums his agreement, but he doesn't stop kissing her. "Waffles are… waiting and..." His lips cover hers again, muffling the rest of her words. She grins, pulling back just enough to say, "And your mother."

That stops him.

With a quiet groan, Oliver pushes his forehead against hers. "I guess we should go down."

"Yeah," Felicity says… and yet, neither of them move. "Moving… any time now."

Oliver just closes his eyes, angling his head so his lips brush softly against hers. She's trembling and she holds him a little tighter.

He's about to pull her back into his lap, waffles be damned, when the sound of Ellie running towards the room with a breathless, "Gramma wants to know if you guys are coming," interrupts them.

Felicity closes her eyes. "Oh, that is so not something I needed to hear coming from her mouth."

Oliver grins, giving her a quick kiss before he says, "Tell her we'll be right there, Ellie-bug."

"Okay," the toddler replies, and then she's off again.

"I think I'm going to take a shower," Felicity says.

"And miss the waffles?" Oliver asks.

"Save me one with strawberries." She leans in, but before her lips touch his she pauses, hesitating, and Oliver closes the gap for her, not willing to let any opportunity to kiss her pass. Felicity grins against him, clearly in favor of his decision as she amends, "Or two."

"There are two Queen women downstairs, you really think I stand a chance?" Oliver teases, and she pulls back, cocking her head, a little line forming between her brows. "What?"

"Ellie told me that I have a company, called Queen, Inc."

Felicity pauses, not because he needs a second to process what she's saying - her own company, that's fantastic - but because she's clearly

not sure how to say what she wants to say.

"Do you think we're… that we're, you know… married?" she asks just as the faint echo of the doorbell ringing filters from downstairs, followed by Ellie - who is clearly still up there, waiting for them - saying, "I'll get it!"

Chapter 9

"*I'll get it!*"

It's the sound of Ellie's exclamation that has Felicity and Oliver simultaneously reaching for the sheet and scrambling out, nearly ripping down the tent he and Ellie had painstakingly constructed in their haste as Oliver says, "Ellie, wait!" as Felicity yells, "Don't answer that!"

The idea of Slade ringing the doorbell is so amazingly ridiculous that it can't possibly be him, but it could also be anyone. And the list of 'anyone's' that don't need to see Ellie is so long it could wrap around the world a hundred times… which might be a slight exaggeration considering the billions of people who have zero interest in how the Queens spend their time, but *still*.

That also doesn't mean someone else didn't see her when she was at Queen Consolidated earlier.

Isabel.

What would Isabel care about a mystery child from Oliver's past? She's already got the company.

Still.

Felicity's brain is misfiring left and right as she and Oliver rush down the hallway - how in the *world* that kid has already memorized this place is beyond her; Felicity's been here just as long and she's still turned around - when the front door opens.

"Ellie, wait!" Oliver says, his voice carrying through the anteroom as they reach the stairs… but Ellie's on the landing of the left staircase, staring up at them. They both stop for a split second, and Felicity wonders if Oliver's feeling the same relief that's running rampant through her before he jogs down the stairs with a soft, "Hey."

"I *was* waiting, daddy, I know not to answer the door without you," she says. She pointed towards the door. "But Raisa beat you."

"Good, that's good," Oliver says, and Felicity can see the plaintive smile on his face as he reaches their daughter. "C'mere, baby."

He scoops her up, turning to face the front door, partially hiding her

from view, looking torn between wanting to go down there and see who's at the door and staying right there, hiding her - she votes for the latter because really, threat or not, the less people who see Ellie, the better. Felicity's right behind him, and she moves to stand in front of them, although what exactly she thinks she's going to do is beyond her…

"It's Uncle Diggle!" Ellie exclaims with a giant grin as the visitor comes into view. She wiggles in Oliver's arms. "Daddy, I want down."

"Hey," Diggle says, stepping into the foyer, holding a few sheets of folded papers and a small duffle bag. He gives Raisa a grateful nod where she's holding the door open for him just as Ellie slips out of her father's arms and dashes around Felicity, heading straight for him.

Diggle's immediate response is to stop dead in his tracks, his eyebrows meeting his hairline.

One second he's got nothing but papers and a plastic bag, and in the next there's an Ellie in the mix as she launches herself at him.

Felicity can see the split second of hesitation on Diggle's face - should he pick her up, or head her off, or point her back at them - but maybe it's the pure expectation and glee on the little girl's face that has that hesitation disappearing and then he's leaning down to pick her up.

"Hi!" Ellie says as Diggle hauls her up, letting out a heavy whoosh of air.

"Hi yourself," he replies. He shifts her onto one arm, covertly holding the papers and bag behind his back with his other hand as he asks, "Anyone ever tell you you should consider a career as a linebacker?"

"I am one," Ellie says matter-of-factly, prompting an amused grin to light up Diggle's face. "We have our own team, 'member? You're coach, Sara's a fullback, Aunt Lyla is a safety, and Uncle Roy is the quarterback. And Aunt Thea plays the tackle. And when daddy plays, momma calls him the tight end."

Diggle huffs out a chuckle, saying, "The tight end, huh?" as his eyes slip over to where she and Oliver are.

All it takes is one quick glance from him for Felicity to remember that she and Oliver are rather… *unkempt*.

That's one way to put it.

They're both barefoot, something she's distinctly aware of as she steps off the stairs onto the cool marbled floor, and Felicity doesn't have to see a mirror to know her hair's still a tangled mess from bed, and her shirt is mussed and her lips… well, if they look as swollen and used as they *feel*…

She'd just been kissing Oliver.

No, she'd just *made out* with Oliver - with *Oliver Queen*, *the* Oliver Queen, *her* Oliver Queen… well not *her* Oliver Queen like he's *hers*… except *oh* this gets confusing - and, anyhow, now Diggle's staring at them like he knows *exactly* what they'd been doing and everything she's currently thinking and he finds it funny as hell.

"Good morning, you two," Diggle says. Felicity feels a blush creep up her neck, making her ears feel oddly hot as he grins at them, a grin she really wants to glare at, especially when Oliver's hand lands on her lower back like he knows exactly what she's feeling. Diggle doesn't miss it. "I see it's been very good."

Felicity opens her mouth to say *something* - something good, something really good and logical and full of explanations - just as Oliver raises a hand towards Diggle, like he's warding the other man off, but Ellie cuts them all off.

"Are you here for daddy's strawberry waffles?" Ellie asks, pulling Diggle's attention back to her.

Diggle's eyes find Oliver's, his eyebrows going higher, if that's even possible. "Uh…"

"Aunt Lyla says you're a strawberry hog," Ellie continues and Diggle almost looks affronted. "But you can't hog all the strawberries this time because there's not a lot."

"Aunt Lyla… She said that, huh?" he ask, his initial surprise at the honorary title shifting to something drier.

"Yep. But you can't eat all of them, Uncle Diggle, because we don't have enough."

"Okay," Diggle says with a chuckle. "How about I promise not to hog all the strawberries this time?"

Ellie nods. "That's a good plan. I'll make sure daddy has extra for you next time."

"That's very nice of you." Diggle looks back at Oliver, a smile playing on his lips. "And I'm very interested to see your daddy in the kitchen."

Felicity doesn't have to look at Oliver to know he's giving Diggle a tired look.

Ellie shakes her head. "He's not making them. Gramma is, just like how daddy does."

"Gramma?" Diggle echoes, his eyes narrowing with unanswered questions.

"Yep," Ellie says. She stretches her head to look behind Diggle. When she can't see all the way around him, she leans all the way over, trusting him completely to not let her fall as she reaches as far as she can, forcing Diggle to readjust her. "Is Sara here?"

"Sara?" Diggle repeats, furrowing his brow.

"Yeah, momma said the next time she comes over we could make cookies. Sara's really good at making cookies, Aunt Lyla taught her how to make designs, and Aunt Lyla was going to teach me and daddy how to make them."

Past the fact that they're all learning that Oliver must practically live in the kitchen in the future, Felicity realizes that it's not *their* Sara she's talking about. It's Diggle's *daughter* Sara. Felicity's eyes widen. Diggle doesn't know he has a daughter, or that her name is Sara. Should he know? Would it make any difference if they knew about her and he didn't?

Suddenly it strikes her as very interesting that they name her Sara.

Why would they name her Sara? She didn't think they were *that* close.

The thought process and its possibilities have her head spinning, and she's about to divert the conversation, but Diggle beats her to it.

"Sara had other things to do, munchkin," Diggle replies, but the line between his brows hasn't disappeared, and Felicity wonders what he's thinking.

"Oh," Ellie says, disappointment coloring her tone.

"I'm sure she'll come over when she's done though."

Ellie instantly brightens. "Okay!"

Raisa steps forward from where she'd closed the front door. "Will you be staying for breakfast, Mr. Diggle?"

"Yes," Oliver says before Diggle has the chance to respond. He nods, giving Raisa a smile. "He will."

"I'll let Mrs. Queen know," Raisa responds, moving back towards the kitchen, but not before giving Oliver a warm smile in return.

Felicity wonders if it's her imagination that the Russian woman's face grows softer, almost hopeful, when she sees them standing together, as disheveled as they are. She decides yes because her head is still a little fuzzy from the fact that she just made out with her future husband… er, boyfriend, or… fiancé? Why is that such an important thing for her to know all of a sudden?

"She also wanted me to tell you that breakfast is almost ready, Mr. Oliver."

"Thank you, Raisa."

The older woman nods before disappearing down a hallway.

Oliver's never mentioned her before, not once, but the love between them is evident. It's a stark reminder that Felicity's seeing things she never, ever, *ever* thought she'd get to see, and it's only making everything that's happened in the last fourteen hours super vivid.

"You wanna go help finish breakfast while I talk to your, uh, mom and dad?" Diggle asks Ellie.

"Okay," Ellie says and Diggle sets her down. "I'll make sure gramma saves some strawberries for you."

He chuckles warmly. "Thanks, Ellie."

Ellie turns to run back into the kitchen but Oliver leans down, catching her arm before she can get very far. "Hey, Speed Racer, let's not run in the house, okay?"

"Okay, but gramma told me to hurry," Ellie replies. "I stir the batter and she cuts the strawberries. She cuts them just like you do, daddy."

"Well now you know who taught me," Oliver says, tugging her shirt down. Felicity blinks, an emotion she's not ready to name filling her chest at that - he doesn't even realize what he's doing, he's just being a

dad. She bites her lip to stem the smile threatening to take over her face as Oliver pats Ellie's hip. "No running, please."

"Okay," Ellie says, turning back towards the kitchen, still taking off at a clipped pace.

They all watch her go and when she disappears around the corner, Felicity glances at Oliver.

Her heart clenches at the gentle smile on his face.

He's different, and it's not just the smile that makes him look years younger, it's more than that, it's deeper. He's lighter, more free than she's ever seen him before. His shoulders aren't as drawn down, the lines in his face are softer, almost gone, and the circles under his eyes are missing. But it's the shadows in his eyes… they're faded, less intense. It's almost like knowing about Ellie, knowing he can have more than the cold, dank foundry she knew he'd always believed was his destiny, has given him…

Hope.

That's what she's seeing.

It's amazing how much it's changing him, and even more amazing how little he's always had.

Oliver's always been a gorgeous man, there was never any question of that, but right now he's *beautiful*… and this beautiful man just kissed her, just told her he wants to be with her, that he wants this, that he's wanted it for a long time… with her.

"Whoa," Felicity whispers, out loud, causing him to look at her.

His smile doesn't disappear.

More whoa.

Her mind's running seven thousand miles an hour as she processes what she's seeing, but despite that, she finds herself smiling back, almost like it's involuntary, like it's just what she's supposed to do, because Oliver's smiling at her.

"I see I missed a lot," Diggle says, pulling them away from each other. He's grinning, sporting what she'd call a 'stupid idiot' grin, because it looks like it's about to break his face. "It's about damn time."

"What? No," Felicity says just as Oliver's hand covers her lower back again. She glances at him and then back to Diggle. "You…?"

"I'm not blind, Felicity," Diggle replies, shaking his head, his smile not dimming in the least.

"Well, neither am I," she says, her voice rising slightly. "But I didn't know."

"There's always been something between you two, since the night you dragged his bullet-ridden ass into the foundry." He shrugs. "I definitely didn't think it'd take seeing your future child to make this…" He waves the papers back and forth between them before smirking. "Happen."

"Nothing's… happening," Felicity stumbles. "Yet."

"Just give me a heads up when you two get a head start on that little one so I can make myself scarce."

Felicity's heart drops. It slams into the floor and splatters all over the place, quickly followed by every single organ in her body at the thought of doing *that* with Oliver. It's the logical assumption because hello, Ellie exists, but she just found out that Oliver has feelings for her, that he's thought about her like that, and that it wasn't just her. But they've barely done anything past kissing - amazing kissing, the kinds of kisses people write songs and poetry and possibly whole operas about - but not *that*.

Okay, *yeah*, they might've been on their way towards doing that very thing, and oh wow, how far would they have gone had Diggle not arrived? *Something* might have happened…

The thought of what that something might be makes her insides twist in a wicked dance of nerves and anticipation. Just kissing him was more than enough to solidify the few fantastical dreams she'd allowed herself. Imagine if… *no*, not imagining, they so didn't have time for imagining.

"John..." Oliver starts, shaking his head as Felicity says, "No, no, we were just… we talked, we just talked. We're just talking, now, it's not… we're not-"

Diggle grins. "I'm just playing, Felicity."

"Ha," Felicity says, her voice a little too high. "Just playing. Right."

"I'm sure you didn't come by just for waffles," Oliver says, the word 'waffles' encompassing far more than breakfast food as his hand slides up her back, his fingers grazing her neck. "Did something come up?" He pauses, and Felicity can feel the air in the room changing as he asks, "Is it Slade?"

That instantly sobers all of them.

Slade.

How could she forget for one second about Slade? It feels like an eternity has passed since yesterday afternoon, since Barry brought Ellie back, since Slade appeared and she ran with their daughter tucked in her arms, wanting nothing more than to stay and fight, to not abandon her friends, to not leave Oliver behind... So much has happened, so much has changed, and she'd almost let herself get caught up in the weird euphoria that has been her life for the last day. It's a little surprising, actually, how quickly she's already acclimated to having Ellie around, to having Oliver there like he had been last night… and this morning.

Surprising… alarming… shocking…

"Actually , yeah," Diggle says, nodding. "We did a quick search in the foundry last night, and found something missing. He took the skeleton key."

Oliver stiffens.

"Oh," Felicity whispers. "That's bad. That's very bad. He could get in anywhere he wants with that."

"I know," Diggle says.

Felicity doesn't have to look at Oliver to know he's already thinking about the fact that he was *here* when Slade was out there, doing who the hell knows what with the skeleton key. But what could he have done? They still don't know where Slade is or what he's doing, it would have been as fruitless as trying to find a microscopic needle in a haystack.

As if on cue, Oliver's hand slides away from her. She can feel him retreating, away from her, away from what they'd had just a few minutes ago.

No.

Felicity doesn't think twice. She turns, wrapping her arm around him just enough so her hand's resting on his back, keeping him right next to her. He glances down at her, his brow furrowed… but he relaxes, *slightly*, and it's enough.

Diggle clears his throat. "And we got a report this morning of an attack at a warehouse on the outskirts of Starling."

"What warehouse?" Felicity asks.

"It apparently used to be a holding facility for S.T.A.R. Labs," Diggle replies. "They terminated the lease last month."

"S.T.A.R. Labs?" Felicity repeats, glancing quickly at Oliver, not missing the way his face shutters again before looking to Diggle again. "Barry's at S.T.A.R. Labs. In Central City, I mean, not here, but… Did anyone get hurt?"

"No, but they're being very hush-hush about it, so short of going there ourselves, we don't know much. The SCPD hasn't released anything and nobody's talking about what exactly was taken."

"So something was taken?" Oliver asks.

"Yeah."

"I can call," Felicity says. "Or maybe go up there?" Although she really doesn't want to do that, she doesn't want to leave Ellie. "Well, call at least. See if anyone in Central City know what was taken."

Diggle nods, but it's not a happy nod. "It gets worse."

"Oh sure," Felicity says, waving her hand. "Of course, because things aren't bad enough."

Diggle indicates the papers in his hand. "Your facial recognition software went off this morning. It was Slade."

"Where?" Oliver asks, reaching for the papers. Diggle hands them over. They're pictures, screenshots, from the cheap traffic cameras found in the deteriorating parts of Starling City. They show the bare glimpse of the man's face, a black hole where his eyepatch is. It's not much, just enough to see it's him. He's in the back of a town car, turning down Franklin Avenue, heading out of the city. "Did anything else come up?"

Diggle shakes his head. "No, but a lot of the street cameras in the Glades aren't on the main city grid anymore, and I didn't know how to access them." He gives Felicity a pointed look. "Which is why I'm here."

"Right, that's my cue," Felicity says. "I have my tablet, I can do it right now."

"Good," Oliver says, taking a deep breath, his eyes on the pictures. "We need to know where he's going, what he's doing." He looks at Diggle. "Where's Sara?"

"I haven't talked to her since last night," Diggle replies.

"I'll call her," Oliver says before looking at Felicity. "We need to know everything about where he's going, and see if you can get the cameras from that warehouse, that had to be him."

"Okay," Felicity says, taking the pictures, scanning them. "This area is a little light on the actual working cameras, it's mostly old storage facilities and warehouses, but I'm sure something caught him."

"The next issue," Oliver says, "is what he took from S.T.A.R. Labs."

"My exact question," Diggle says, bringing up the bag to point at Oliver and Felicity catches a glimpse of what's inside.

"And of course you needed a change of clothes to ponder that question," Felicity says. "Are we turning this into a slumber party?"

Diggle gives her a placid smile. "No, I came here for Slade, and because…" and then he suddenly coughs, standing up a little taller, his voice rising as he finishes, "I got those spare clothes you asked for. Since you didn't have any... the last time I saw you."

"Uh…" Felicity frowns. "Okay, yeah, I guess that's…"

"Mrs. Queen," Diggle says, cutting her off as he nods respectfully at Queen matriarch over Felicity's shoulder. "It's nice to see you again."

The first thing Felicity thinks is: *I didn't take a shower*. Because she didn't, and she's still not wearing makeup and her hair still looks like rat's nest and she's pretty sure anyone with eyes can see she's been making out with Oliver and *why* can't she have been blessed with the kind of genes that allow her to wake up looking just like she did when she went to sleep?

The second thing she thinks is: *Does she know about Slade?*

The third thing is: *Why can't anything just be easy?*

"Mr. Diggle, what a nice surprise," Moira says, coming up behind them. It's because barely a day ago she was pretty sure Moira Queen despised her that Felicity jumps when the older woman's hand lands on her shoulder as she sidles up next to her. "I hear you're staying for breakfast."

"I was just stopping by to check on Mr. Queen, actually," Diggle replies, and when Felicity glances back at him, he sees his gaze dropping to the photos in her hand, like he's saying, '*Put them away, she can see.*' "And to drop off some clothes for Ellie."

"Oh?" Moira asks, amusement coloring her tone.

When nobody says anything, Diggle nods again, an uncomfortable smile tugging at his lips as he plows forward. "Yes. And… I know she didn't have a spare set of clothes, because she was… she didn't have any… here."

Never in Felicity's life did she ever think she'd see the day where John Diggle was actually *nervous*, enough that he was taking after her speaking-wise. They didn't have a cover story planned, and even if they did, it hadn't included Diggle. It's kind of amazing watching him struggle to say something, because what exactly does one say to a woman who is now being called 'gramma' by a child from the future, a woman whom one assumes knows nothing about Oliver's extracurricular activities including sleeping with his EA?

When Diggle looks at her for a split second, she knows she's smiling because he glares at her.

She forces the smile off her face, but his glower doesn't lessen in the least.

"I just wanted to make sure she had everything she needed," Diggle continues haltingly. "And Mr. Queen, here. And… Ms. Smoak."

A tiny delighted snort escapes Felicity before she can stop it and Diggle's jaw tightens. She's about to step in and tell him it's alright, but Oliver beats her to it.

"John, she knows," he says.

"What?" Diggle asks, his eyes flying to Oliver. "She…?"

"She knows, about everything."

Felicity's eyebrows shoot up. *What?*

"Everything?" Diggle repeats.

"Everything," Oliver confirms.

"Like… you, and…" He points at Oliver and at Felicity, and then to the kitchen. "Everything?"

"Like that Ellie's from the future and that I'm the Arrow," he finishes bluntly.

Felicity's eyes widen almost comically, her lips forming a little 'o' as she looks at Moira, who is smiling patiently.

"Everything," Oliver finishes.

"Oh," Diggle says slowly, staring at Oliver… and then he looks at Moira, and then Felicity, before looking back at Oliver. "Man, you cannot keep a secret to save your damn life."

An amused chuckle falls from Moira's lips as Oliver frowns at him.

"I've known for a while, actually," Moira says. "And I had my suspicions long before that."

"I hope he didn't try the sports bottle thing on you," Felicity says, much to Oliver's chagrin, and as he rolls his eyes, Diggle chuckles. Moira raises her eyebrows in question. "He's not very good at cover stories."

"They weren't that bad," Oliver says.

"They weren't that good either," Felicity teases, poking him in the chest. He scowls at her, and she feels a mixture of amazement that she's *teasing* Oliver in the foyer of his gigantic family home with his mother and one of their best friends - like, this is their life now, what happened? - as well as a grim sense of foreboding because now isn't the time. She makes a little face and says, "Sorry."

Exasperation colors Oliver's face before he takes a breath. "Can we just…"

The front door swinging open cuts him off and before Felicity can turn to see who it is, Oliver and Diggle are already moving, like a morbid ballet they've done over and over. They don't even have to think about it - Oliver's arm slips around her waist and he tugs her behind him as Diggle steps in front of all of them, his shoulders stiff, his hand hovering over the holstered gun she knows he keeps at his back.

But it's the exact last person they need to guard themselves again.

Thea Queen breezes into the house.

It's like Ellie's a Queen family magnet. Felicity's now seen more of the Queen family in the space of the last few hours than she has in the entirety of the time Oliver Queen has been in her life.

Thea swings the door shut behind her with a heavy slam, barely giving any of them a glance as she heads towards the stairs.

She knows they're there though because her shoulders are stiff, her walk a little too hurried… or maybe it's all the new information that's been coming to light - like the fact that the devil himself is her biological father. Either way, Thea walks with a purpose that only a Queen can carry as they all freeze, not sure what to say or do, all thinking the same thing: *Ellie*.

Moira's the first to move.

"Thea," she says, surprise and happiness infusing her tone as she steps around Diggle, following her daughter, but the youngest Queen doesn't react past a dismissive glance over her shoulder. "Thea."

"I'm just here to pick up a few things I need at the club," Thea says, jogging up the stairs. Her eyes dance over the small gathering, not an ounce of recognition hitting her face when she sees Felicity or Diggle, before shooting Moira a chilly smile. "Don't want to break up the family meeting."

"No, Thea," Moira says, shaking her head, "that's not-"

But she's already gone.

Moira pauses at the base of the stairs, watching her go before she takes a deep breath, turning back to them.

"Felicity," she says, and Felicity doesn't have to hear the words to know what she's already going to say. Neither does Oliver, who

stiffens next to her. "Would you like to get Ellie?"

"Uh," Felicity manages before Oliver cuts her off.

"Is now really the best time for that?" Oliver asks, his voice quiet but the hesitancy is loud and clear, although if it's hesitancy about Ellie seeing Thea right now and vice versa, or about questioning his mother on what is clearly a sore subject, she's not sure, but it's there.

"We should tell her," Moira says.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't-"

"Then-"

"I think Ellie would love to see her," Oliver interrupts again, holding his hand up for emphasis, "but… it's not just the fact that I… that *we* have a daughter now - or we do in the future, or..." He pauses, gathering himself and looks Moira straight in the eye. "It's that… we'd have to tell her everything.

"*I'd* have to tell her everything."

Felicity hears what he's saying: *it has to be all or nothing.*

The words hit Moira at a base level, and Felicity knows she and Oliver are thinking the same thing: another lie. It'd be something else on top of a whole mess of lies and omissions for Thea to push them further away than she already is. It absolutely would not help that it's another thing they both know, that they've both been lying to her *again.* The amount of lies and secrets interwoven in the Queen family's history is vast, life-changing, and this one would be no different.

Felicity wonders what happened in his conversation with Moira the night before for him to be thinking this way, but regardless, she finds she's glad for it. There's a stark difference between the man before her and the one who'd asked Roy to break up with Thea to protect her because he couldn't tell her the truth. Was it hearing his daughter talk about him being the Arrow that changed things? Or that they obviously still do their vigilante work in the future while having a family? That he lives a life without so many secrets shrouding his every move, and he flourishes? *They* flourish?

It's clear he doesn't want to lie to Thea any more than he already has, and a half-truth - just telling her about Ellie, about the shocking turn of events of their daughter from the future falling into their laps -

won't do.

Oliver's struggle is evident and Felicity doesn't think twice about winding her arm around his waist, holding him a little closer. He doesn't react; he just stares at Moira, and maybe it's her imagination when she feels him leaning into her a little bit, but either way, he doesn't shrug her off or pull away. Felicity feels a wave of gratitude that he's letting her be there for him, especially in the face of having to tell someone else he'd been lying to for years now.

Would Thea understand why he did it, why he chose to tell no one, especially those closest to him, those he loved the most? Would she understand his reasoning?

Something tells her it won't go over well either way. And while Ellie would help smooth the waters, even her disarming grin wouldn't change the fact that there were more lies. It's obvious, judging by the way Ellie talks about Aunt Thea and Uncle Roy, that the Queen siblings eventually put their feelings aside, but that doesn't change the *now*.

Moira already knew about him - *has* known about him, apparently - but her cool acceptance of Oliver's nighttime activities would be nothing compared to Thea's reaction. And it was all because of timing. Hearing that her father was Malcolm Merlyn was bad enough, on top of finding out that Oliver knew and chose not to tell her… and now she'd hear that her brother is the Arrow? And meeting a niece who doesn't technically exist in this time period because she hasn't been born yet? Isn't *that* just the cherry on top of it all.

It's a lot to take in for anyone… and for Thea Queen, potentially more fault to rest at the feet of her family.

Felicity really can't blame Oliver for hesitating.

"Maybe it's time," Moira finally says. Oliver stiffens further. His mother steps towards him, the emotion in her eyes clear. "Ellie is more important than what's happening right now, between all of us. Thea's her *aunt*, Oliver." She shakes her head in amazement. "My daughter has a *niece*. And it would be good for her to at least know that… despite everything that's come to light recently, this is still her family. We are still her family. No matter what."

Oliver doesn't respond. He takes a slow breath and Felicity glances up at him. His face is tight with guilt, sadness, regret… and fear. The fear dominates every inch of him and Felicity holds him a little tighter. He

looks down at her and she offers him a little smile, one he sort of returns as he grips her a little tighter, acknowledging it.

He looks back at Moira.

"Maybe. I want to... I want her to meet her," he says softly and Moira moves to respond. He cuts her off. "But meeting Ellie isn't going to get Thea to forgive you, mom. Or me."

"That's not what I'm doing," Moira says, her gaze never wavering. Felicity sees the mental wall sliding up, but not before she catches the flash of hurt culpability in her eyes.

That's *exactly* what she's doing.

Moira stares at Oliver with a quiet, strained desperation, and for the first time Felicity lets herself wonder what the older woman's gone through the last several years - the hurt and pain, the anger she's dealt with, the fear and the constant threat of the unknown, the dangers to her family, especially after the Gambit went down, the hard choices she had to make, choices she's looking back on with regret, especially because the consequences of those choices is losing her her family.

It's a little shocking that Felicity can look at Moira Queen now and actually feel kinship and understanding… *empathy*.

Introducing Thea to Ellie will undoubtedly keep the young woman in her life for the time being, especially because they don't know how long Ellie will be there. But it won't fix anything.

But Moira obviously doesn't care. She wants Thea to meet Ellie - she wants her family together, at whatever cost.

Felicity glances at Diggle, who's watching the exchange quietly, keeping his distance.

Oliver glances down at Felicity who looks up at him at the same time. She can see the question in his eyes and she nods, ready to back whatever decision he makes either way - she'll be here for him with whatever he chooses, for the moment when they tell Thea and for whatever happens afterwards.

He takes a deep breath and nods again, looking back at Moira. "We don't know how long Ellie will be here, anyway. Thea should meet her niece."

"Thank you, Oliver," Moira says, the meaning behind the simple words heavy in her tone. She smiles at him, recognizing what he's giving up.

Thea jogging back down the stairs interrupts the moment, her heeled boot echoing through the room.

Oliver stiffens again, his hold on her growing a little tighter and Felicity reciprocates.

Moira turns to the stairs just as her daughter steps off them. "Thea, there's somebody we'd like you to meet."

"I have to go actually," Thea replies, walking right past her, an overnight bag hanging from her fingers.

"Thea, please," Moira says.

The underlying plea in her mother's voice makes Thea pause right as she reaches the door. She turns, raising a dispassionate eyebrow at Moira, before her eyes sweep over the rest of them, stopping on Felicity.

It takes everything in Felicity's power to not step back at the intensity in the younger Queen's eyes, and if she didn't already know, that look alone tells her that she is Moira Queen's daughter.

A thin smile lights Thea's face as she looks at Moira again.

"Can't say I'm very interested in my brother's bedmates these days, mom," she says dryly.

Felicity's eyebrows fly up in surprise as Oliver holds her a little closer with a sharp, "Thea," just as Felicity manages a, "Oh, we're not…" as she points at him.

"It's really not any of my business actually," Thea interrupts, giving Felicity a smile that definitely does not reach her eyes. "It's not your fault my family is feeling the need to overshare since they lie about pretty mcuh everything else." She turns back to the door. "I have to go."

"Thea," Moira starts, but Thea's already opening the door, letting in a rush of chilly morning air, and then she's gone, the door shutting with a resounding thud, loud enough to make Felicity jump.

Silence fills the room.

Diggle's staring at the floor, looking as uncomfortable as Felicity feels, and when she glances at Oliver, his head is bowed, his lips pinched together tightly. The hurt is there, but she catches what looks like relief on his face, and she can only imagine the guilt he's feeling about having a little more time before he has to explain himself to his sister.

"You okay?" Felicity whispers, just for him.

His special Oliver-brand wall snaps into place and he pushes a smile to his lips with a nod. "Yeah."

He's lying, they both know it, but he doesn't let her call him on it. Instead, he looks at his mother.

Moira's staring at the door, her back stiff, and almost like everyone's taking their cue from her, nobody moves. For a second, the only sounds that can be heard are the distinct clatter of dishes in the kitchen and the barely audible murmurs between Ellie and Raisa.

"Mom," Oliver starts, releasing Felicity, stepping towards Moira, to comfort her - they clearly mended more than a few bridges the night before.

"It's fine, Oliver," Moira says, turning with a smile on her lips, a superficial one that looks more like muscle memory than anything, highlighting that Thea's dismissal hurt more than she's willing to let on. The older woman looks at Diggle. "You'll be staying then, Mr. Diggle?" She waves to the kitchen. "The waffles are ready, and I'm sure Ellie's made you a special one with extra strawberries."

"Thank you," Diggle replied, giving her a warm smile. "I'd love to stay, Mrs. Queen."

"Please," she replies. "Call me Moira."

Diggle doesn't reply right away and Felicity can't blame him - she's nowhere near being able to voluntarily call her Moira despite her insistence, and she can't imagine he's any closer than she is.

"I'm going to call Sara," Oliver says. "Get her status."

Felicity looks at him, but he's not looking at her. It's clear from his tone that the wall he'd let down over the last several hours is definitely back in place. The changes she saw last night and this morning are hidden behind a shuttered expression again. Thea's abrupt brushoff on top of the new information about Slade's activities

the night before have pushed him back to business as usual, back to the Oliver he was before Ellie appeared, and he doesn't want to waste another second.

"I'll go with you," Felicity says.

She's not sure who's more surprised when she speaks, her or Oliver.

"No," he replies, shaking his head, his hand grazing her shoulder; it doesn't escape her attention that it's almost perfunctory now. "Go eat, I'll be right back." Oliver moves to step around her but she grabs his arm, stopping him. "Felicity…"

"We'll be there in a minute," Felicity says, smiling at Moira and Diggle.

"Alright," Moira says with a smile, another one that doesn't quite reach her eyes, before she turns to Diggle. "Shall we?"

"Lead the way," Diggle says, stepping forward to follow.

He glances at Felicity, his eyes dropping to the photos she's still holding, and she's already saying, "I'm on it."

Diggle gives her a quick nod, his eyes darting to Oliver for a split second, before he disappears behind Moira.

And then it's just them.

"Felicity, I won't be long. Go eat."

"Twenty minutes ago I found you in a pillow fort giggling with our daughter," Felicity says, cutting him off, and he blinks in surprise, a tender look crossing his face before it disappears again. "Where'd that guy go?"

Oliver closes his eyes.

"Things with Thea aren't going to be fixed overnight, Oliver," she says slowly, and he winces, frowning. "And it's not your fault what happened with Slade." His eyes snap open, and the second they meet hers, she says, "It's *not*. We had no clues, nothing to go on last night, it would've been fruitless, and you wouldn't have had that time with Ellie."

"I know," he concedes quietly, but Felicity can hear the hardness lining the words. "That doesn't change the fact that people could have gotten hurt-"

"But they didn't."

"That we know of," Oliver retorts sharply. Felicity pauses and he lets out an agitated sigh, scrubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay," he replies. He takes a deep breath, almost like he's struggling for what to say. After a moment, he meets her gaze. "I know you're trying to help, and you are. I just… can't stop thinking about the… the what-if's."

"Oliver Queen in a nutshell," Felicity replies, keeping her voice light.

Oliver huffs out a quiet chuckle followed by a smile, one that slowly becomes more real as the seconds pass.

He stares at her, and she sees the walls starting to crumble again, like he's making an active choice to open up to her. It takes her breath away. His eyes drop down to her lips when they part and she can tell he's remembering what they were doing just a few minutes ago - it's weird to think it was just a few minutes ago, and even weirder to think that so much has happened in less than day… but it's not just that he's remembering, it's that he's *open* to it, that he's letting himself be open to it, keeping himself open…

Whoa.

This was going to take a little getting used to.

Oliver cocks his head slightly and grabs her hand, lacing their fingers together. "C'mere."

"What…?" He pulls her closer and she smiles, shaking her head. "Talk about not the time."

"If there's one thing this entire situation is making me realize," Oliver says, his voice subdued as he pulls her into his arms, "is that we have to make the time."

Her heart skips a beat and before she can respond, Oliver kisses her.

It's nothing like their last few kisses, not nearly touching on the scorching passion that'd been building between them at an alarming rate upstairs, but it's just as intense, just as powerful, and it sends a heady rush of need and an emotion she isn't ready to name searing

through her as she leans into him, kissing him back.

"Mm," she whispers, her lips grazing his. "This is nice."

Oliver smiles, his nose brushing against hers. "It is."

Felicity sighs, kissing him again, moving to wrap her arms around him before remembering the pictures in her hand.

When she sighs again, it's heavier. "I need to get my tablet."

The bleak reminder of what's happening around them makes Oliver's face fall but he recovers just as quickly.

"Yeah," he says, nodding. "I'll go call Sara, and then…"

A shout suddenly shatters the moment, one that sounds alarmingly like Moira, quickly followed by the ringing severity of a gunshot.

Oh god, no.

Oliver and Felicity are already moving.

He tries to push her back as he runs past her but she just grabs his hand, both of them darting towards the kitchen. Fear-spiked adrenaline rushes through her so hard and fast it leaves her head spinning with nothing but the rapid racing of her heart - *no, no, please, no* - as they both slam into the kitchen at the same time.

Felicity's barely aware of Diggle's unconscious body on the floor, or the sight of Moira struggling to stand in the background, gripping the counter, blood coating half her face from a nasty gash, and what looks like Raisa's arm where she's on the ground behind the kitchen island…

In a split second, she takes it all in, she sees that... but she doesn't *care*.

Because Slade's standing in the middle of the kitchen…

And her daughter's in his arms.

Chapter 10

"Daddy," Ellie whimpers, and it takes everything inside Oliver to stay right where he is… especially as Slade lets out a, "Shh," and starts rocking his daughter, his hand patting her little leg in a mockingly soothing motion.

The most vicious swell of violence he's ever felt in his life rips through him. It's so primal, so etched into his sense of being that it blurs his vision and sends a surge of furious protectiveness through his veins like he's never experienced before.

She's so tiny, so miniscule in his arms; her cheeks are splotchy with fear, her eyes wet with unshed tears. Her little arms are curled into her chest, her back stiff. She knows this is a bad man, but she doesn't know what to do.

His insides revolt, urging him to do *something*, but he doesn't move, he can't, because he doesn't know what Slade will do. And he's well aware of what the other man *could* do.

Every single instinct is screaming at him to get Ellie away from Slade, but he doesn't know *how*. One wrong move and he could lose everything, a life he barely let himself dream about much less actually believe he could have.

That thought alone almost has him moving again, but he stays right where he is.

Never in his life has he had so much to lose.

It's terrifying.

"Daddy," Slade repeats, a cold grin on his face. "And here I thought I knew everything about you, Oliver." His eyes slide over to Felicity, and another streak of ice-cold terror has him trembling as Slade takes her in. "I'm learning so many interesting things."

How? How did he know where to find them?

Felicity's squeezing his hand so hard that he's surprised his bones aren't breaking, or that he's not snapping hers with the severity of his answering grip. He should let her go, he knows this, get all of Slade's attention on him, but the thought of doing that makes him freeze even

more, almost like letting go of her will be the last thing they'll ever do.

"Ellie, sweetie, look at me," Felicity says in a quiet tone that shakes with fear and determination. Ellie's eyes switch to Felicity and the quiet terror on his daughter's face is a knife slicing through his chest. "You're being such a big, brave girl. It's going to be okay. Do you understand? Just keep looking at me. Don't look at him, just at me."

The little girl's watery blue eyes widen at her mother's words and she nods the little bit that Slade's grip allows her as her gaze locks with Felicity's. The complete and total trust shining through her obvious fear is another knife to his chest.

Ellie's so brave, so incredibly brave, and she believes every word out of her mother's mouth.

It's not really a promise Felicity can keep, but Oliver knows exactly what she's doing: she wants to grant their daughter as much peace and security as she can, because she's just as panicked and uncertain as he is. But even if Slade snaps their three-year-old's neck in front of them, she wants it to happen while Ellie stares back at her with the knowledge that everything's going to be okay, no matter what.

Oliver's going to be sick. Bile rises up in the back of his throat, chalky with a terror he's never felt before, but he pushes it back down, forcing himself to let go of Felicity's hand. If she can be brave for Ellie, he surely can too.

"She's three years old, Slade," Oliver says, his voice low and measured despite the frenzy inside - It's the only thought in his mind at the moment other than "*don't*" and "*please, god, let this be a nightmare*" and "*take me instead*."

"Yes, she is," Slade asks with a sickening amount of amusement in his voice as he looks down at her, one of his hands moving to the back of Ellie's neck.

Horror twists Oliver's insides - he's not Deathstroke here, he's Slade Wilson, the same unassuming businessman who contributed to Moira Queen's campaign and toured the Queen Manor… his hand is bare, and so large, engulfing her throat…

A tiny whimper slips out, and Oliver inhales sharply, gritting his teeth to keep himself still. He can see her lips are trembling before she pinches her mouth in a thin, white line.

"Darling little thing," Slade continues. "Not sure if she has your eyes or her mother's. But then again…" He looks back to Oliver, who meets his gaze head-on. "My vision isn't quite what it used to be."

He chuckles darkly, his grip on her little neck tightening. Ellie lets out another frightened noise that Felicity immediately answers with a soft hushing sound and it takes every single ounce of willpower Oliver has to keep his focus locked on Slade instead of his daughter.

This is how he helps her, keeping Slade's attention on *him*.

"You're threatening a toddler, Slade," Oliver points out. "An innocent child. What would Shado think about that?"

"You don't get to talk to me about Shado!" Slade roars, his eye widening with a manic rage that translates into Ellie, who starts full-on sobbing, her eyes never leaving Felicity.

"Oliver," Felicity says, her voice shaking with nervous fear, but he can't even spare her a glance.

"No," Oliver counters, shaking his head head slowly. He narrows his eyes at Slade, *glaring* at him as he says, "*You* don't get to talk to *me* about Shado." He tries to ignore the little breath that Felicity sucks down in wild anticipation as fury floods the other man's face, echoing the wild rush of adrenaline in Oliver's system as he continues, "She didn't choose you, Slade, and you weren't the one who had to watch her executed right in front of you."

He's deadly calm, the words hanging heavily in the air, the words that have been a living thing between him and Slade for years. Well, no more.

Oliver grits his teeth.

"So please," he says darkly, "tell me how it is that you have the right to break into my home and threaten my daughter's life because I somehow wronged you."

"You chose Sara over her," Slade accuses, letting go of Ellie's neck to point in his direction, his voice rising. "You took *everything* from me. I loved her and you threw her away like she was *nothing*." He points at his chest, the sudden movement making Ellie whimper. "Well, she wasn't nothing to me!"

"I chose her *and* Sara over myself!" Oliver snaps. "You weren't *there*.

Ivo told me to choose and I charged the gun instead. I *never* picked Sara over Shado, I could never make that choice. I tried to give up *my* life for both of them, but Ivo wouldn't let me! I wanted it to be me, I didn't want anyone else to die because of me."

A strangled noise of pain at his words draws Oliver's gaze ever-so-briefly to his mother who stands a few paces behind Slade, still holding the counter for support. He wouldn't have understood before - he couldn't have - how much his willingness to sacrifice his own life would affect his mother. He gets it now, amazingly. The thought of anything happening to Ellie… he thinks he might burn the world to the ground to keep that from happening.

He thinks he wouldn't even regret it.

"I don't believe you," Slade tells him, his voice harsh, rooted in self-righteous rage. "You'd say anything right now to save your little whelp. But you forget, I know you, kid. You aren't that selfless."

"You have no *idea* what you're talking about," Felicity bites out in a near-growl that has an unexpected surge of pride and affection washing through Oliver.

"You…" Slade says, turning his gaze towards her, cocking his head with disdain. "You I almost feel sorry for. You got sucked in by a pretty face like so many before you." His voice hardens with animus. "But he brings death everywhere he goes, and it won't be long before it touches you." He gives her a jagged smile that has ice settling in the pit of Oliver's stomach. "And your precious little Ellie."

There's no swaying him… there never was.

Oliver knows this, *has* known it, since well before Ellie even came into their lives. He wonders if his one-time friend didn't die after all, if the mirakuru resurrected only vengeance and a twisted sense of logic purely driven by hate. Even if they could get the cure, could use it on him, the man he once knew is gone. There's nothing left of the one-time companion who saved his life countless times, who he called a friend, a brother…

That man died on the Amazo just as surely as Shado died by Ivo's gun.

"He's damned you, Felicity," Slade continues, drawing her name out, making it sound like it's covered in acid. Oliver feels her stiffening with her own rage next to him. "And he damned your child before she was even born."

The words are cutting, and Oliver feels them deep in his bones.

It's exactly what Slade wants. He wants to throw him off his game, to play on the insecurities he confided in him on the island, and for a split second, it works. Oliver feels the gnawing pit of doubt and fear appear in his chest, the quiet voice whispering, "*What if…*", the worry that maybe he is the danger, something both Felicity and Ellie should be running from…

But in the next instant, it's gone.

Oliver isn't sure how he knows, but he does: he hasn't damned them, and he won't. If anything, everything since last night has shown him that embracing that light instead of running from it ensures their safety more than anything in the entire world. Maybe it's the strength he feels radiating off Felicity, or waking up and seeing his daughter's joyful smile, or hearing her happy giggles this morning, he's not sure, but whatever it is convinces him.

He doesn't damn them.

The instant he recognizes it, his chest loosens, something clicking into place deep inside him.

"I'm pretty sure the only one who's damned here is you," Felicity says, her fortitude ringing through the kitchen, grounding him. "And that has nothing to do with Oliver."

Slade's attention is on her. As much as that fact brings a fresh surge of protectiveness rushing through Oliver's blood, he's also aware enough to recognize it for the opportunity it is. It's not much - Slade is undoubtedly highly aware of Oliver's every move - but it's *something*. It's an edge, a split second's advantage that Oliver can't let go to waste, not with Ellie in his grip, her life hanging in the balance.

Slade smirks. "I thought Oliver had a thing for stronger women." He narrows his eyes, like he's seeing Felicity in a new light. "I can see the appeal now."

Oliver doesn't have to beat Slade, he just has to save Ellie, wrench her from his iron grip.

It seems far more doable than defeating the mirakuru-powered madman unarmed.

At least he hopes it is.

Oliver charges, a violent, adrenaline-fueled rush that barrels into Slade full force, a vicious shout falling from his throat. It's enough to send him stumbling back two steps and - more importantly - it's enough to make him drop Ellie.

But that's the extent of his impact.

Ellie shrieks as she drops, landing with a thud and a wail that's an awful mixture of fear and pain from the impact. Felicity scrambles forward toward the girl with outstretched arms, scooping her up and scurrying backwards as fast as she can, out of Slade's immediate reach. And Slade… Slade laughs as Oliver throws everything he has into fighting against the beast of a man.

Oliver has never hit so hard in his life. He has never been so determined, so driven. *Never*.

But it's nowhere near enough.

The mirakuru that simultaneously powers and poisons Slade gives him a kind of power that Oliver can never hope to match, and soon it's too much. His desperation to save his family is no match for the dangerous rage in the other man's every move as Slade's fist lands on his jaw with an audible crack, wrenching Oliver's head to the side with so much force it feels like his muscles are tearing.

"Shado didn't get to have a family, you took that away from her!" he growls, his fists colliding in a bruising series of punches to his kidneys and ribs. "You don't get to have one either."

The hits come fast and hard, barely giving Oliver a chance to breathe much less react, but his words slice through him like a serrated blade. He tries to say, "Run," to Felicity, but Slade's already moving, landing a bone-crunching kick to his knee…

And then Slade's iron grip wraps around his neck.

"Oliver!"

Felicity's panicked voice pierces the air as Slade lifts him off the ground, fingers wrapped in a deadly hold around his windpipe, slowly crushing it, forcing the air out of him.

Oliver wants to tell her to run, to take Ellie and *go* while they can, but his voice is too strangled to work. Air slips down his throat like it's being sucked down through a straw and it's not enough; his lungs

scream for more, his voicebox nearly collapsing under Slade's violent grip.

He doesn't know what will happen if Slade kills him... *when* Slade kills him.

Will Ellie continue on, an anomaly in the timeline, a girl with a father who never was? Or will she fade away like she never existed in the first place?

That hurts more than anything Slade could ever do to him, and he desperately hopes for the former. For Felicity's sake. For Ellie's *own* sake. But even if she disappears like a mirage, too perfect to be real, he won't regret this. He won't regret giving up his own life to spare her the pain of a death at Slade Wilson's hands.

It will be worth it.

Felicity isn't in his field of vision, but he doesn't have to see her to know she's moving about, looking for a weapon, an edge, *anything* to help save him. She's a fighter, this woman who should have one day been his wife. Sometimes with words or with strings of code. She never stops, never gives in. She has the fiercest, most loyal heart he's ever known, and while she's not trained to fight physically, she *will*, because she thinks she needs to, because it's what's *right*. And, god, if he'd ever thought he'd be able to shrug off his feelings for her as some kind of a crush, it was vibrantly clear now how impossible that was always going to be.

He *loves* her.

Fiercely, completely, because this is who she is - a woman with a sense of justice that outstrips even his own, a woman who can make him *smile* at the thought of her even as he's being choked to the brink of death. She's his match, and he *knows* it. He only wishes that he'd had the time to tell her that, that he'd had the time to *show* her.

If there's one thing he'll regret, it's that.

"I'm going to kill you, Oliver," Slade tells him with a chilling calm that rattles Oliver to his bones. "And they're going to watch you die. And then I'm going to kill *them*. Because I *can*. Because they'll die knowing that you failed them, that you weren't half the man they thought you were."

No.

Oliver's lungs burn and his eyes water as he grapples helplessly against Slade's tightening hands. Somewhere in the background he thinks he hears Ellie sobbing. He can hear Felicity shouting something, but it's all quickly fading, his strangled bids for air and the rush of his own blood slipping to the forefront.

He digs his fingernails into Slade's hands, drawing blood that coats his own fingers, but it doesn't even make the man flinch. Oliver tries to push off Slade's abdomen with his feet, tries to wrench himself away, but he's like a ragdoll; all his efforts are futile.

Slade's right, Oliver realizes with sudden, tremendous terror. This is how he dies… staring into the eyes of a madman he once called a friend. Maybe it was always going to end this way. He'd long ago accepted that his death would be a brutal one, but lately - in the last day, anyhow - he'd thought *maybe*…

But it doesn't matter. He's going to die. Here. Now. And worse than that, so is his family…

And there's nothing he can do about it.

Oliver opens his mouth in a silent scream, desperation flooding him as he fights even harder with the little energy he has left.

If he can just tell them to run, tell Felicity to *go*, to get out, get away...

But with every second that passes, more black spots dance in his vision and Felicity and Ellie slowly fall further and further away until he's in another place entirely… until it's just him and Slade. Nothing else exists. Not his mother's kitchen or his daughter's tears or Felicity's screams. They might be on Lian Yu or somewhere in the Glades or anywhere at all.

It doesn't really matter because the world around them melts away and all he can see is Slade's one eye staring at him with cruel, firm intent…

For a split second, even that fades, melting into darkness, a sea of nothingness… until he sees something. It's so quick, almost too quick, but there's enough for him to catch the glint of sunlight, the warmth of a summer breeze drifting over his skin… he tastes salt in the air, hears the crash of waves somewhere close… and laughter.

Happiness.

Felicity's face appears with a wide, beautiful grin… and then Ellie's adorable giggles where she's chasing seagulls… and a little boy.

And just as quickly as he sees it, it's gone…

… because he's falling.

Reality slams back into him as he lands on something cold and hard. Fresh air floods his lungs, making him cough as a roar of pain swamps his ears…

Slade's pain.

It's Slade, Oliver registers belatedly, blinking his watery eyes until his vision clears enough to see - he's on the floor, fighting to breathe and when he looks up, he sees the hilt of a kitchen knife buried in Slade's only remaining eye.

For an ugly second, the only thing Oliver hears is Slade's anguished, rage-filled screams slicing through the air as he lurches away from him, his arms swinging out.

It doesn't make sense. Oliver can't wrap his mind around it, that he's alive... that his family might *live*…

Oliver stumbles to his feet, blinking the white pinpricks out of his vision, expecting to see Felicity, but it's not her and he could not be more surprised in this moment if he tried.

"You stay the hell away from my family, you son of a bitch," Moira Queen demands, fierce and aloof like she hadn't just slammed a knife through a man's eye.

"Mom?" Oliver asks in bewilderment, his voice bruised and thin.

"Daddy! I want my daddy!" Ellie sobs behind them and Oliver's turning to them before he can stop himself. "Momma, let me go!"

"Ellie, *no*," Oliver rasps, ignoring the tearing in his vocal cords, lifting a hand to ward them off as Slade's shaking hand finds the knife hilt. Blinded or not, Slade Wilson is definitely still a threat. "Felicity, get her out of here!"

He knows she'd insist on being at his side - it's one of the things he loves the most about her - but Ellie's safety is the only thing that matters. He has no doubt they're both on the same page about that, a

notion reinforced by the swift, soft padding of Felicity's bare feet against the wood floor and Ellie's increasingly distant cries for him.

"I'm going to *kill you*," Slade growls, ripping the knife from his eye socket, leaving behind a gorey hole in his face. "And I'm going to *enjoy it*." His head turns where Felicity's taken off. His grin is garish, his teeth coated in the blood leaking down his face. "And then it's their turn."

The promise in his voice is chilling, and it takes everything in Oliver to not throw himself at the madman, but he stops himself. They'd fought enough in the dark on Lian Yu that he is more than aware that Slade doesn't need to see to win in combat. His senses are well-honed, and the mirakuru only enhances them, but he *is* unfamiliar territory to him and the pain has to be taking off some of the edge he'd normally have.

Regardless, there's no time to waste and Slade is far from defeated.

Quietly and quickly, razor-sharp fear and adrenaline smothering his pain, Oliver slips around Slade and grabs his mother's arm to pull her behind him.

Slade lunges at them - aimless, broad, powerful strokes that would be deadly if he landed one. Taking Slade out means executing what would be lethal force on anyone else and Oliver knows that, but he can't do that barehanded - if he lets himself think too much about it, he's barely able to stand past the stabbing pain in his knee and the stinging ache in the delicate tissue of his throat. He looks around the room, but he doesn't see much in the way of weapons...

Until he spies Digg's unmoving form near the end of the island.

Instinct takes over as he ducks Slade's next swing, pushing him back in one move before dragging his mother by the arm over toward Digg.

"Oliver, what..." she starts, looking slightly more frazzled than he'd registered at first - her hands are shaking, her hair lacking its usual impeccable styling, and there's blood staining her fingers, but he doesn't let himself think about that for the moment. His mother has had plenty of blood on her hands before. This time, at least, it's warranted.

He makes a quiet hushing noise to cut her off, but it's too late. She's drawn Slade's attention and the man lets out a savage roar as he shifts his attention towards them, moving to attack.

Moira lets out a shaky noise in alarm. She grabs Oliver's arm in a death grip as she whispers, "Oliver…" but he can't do anything, not yet. Oliver looks for the sidearm that Digg always carries on him, pushing his unconscious friend's body out of the way…

There.

Slade is barreling toward Moira when Oliver turns, gun in hand, and empties the entire clip into his nemesis.

The shots are *loud*, and they echo the sound of the bullets ripping into his body as he stutters to a stop, a surprised look crossing his sightless face. The silence that follows is deafening, and for a long second, there's nothing but the wet sound of Slade moving his jaw, trying to speak, but all that comes out is a rivulet of blood.

It slides down his chin, dripping to the floor...

And then he falls.

It suddenly hits him how lucky they are that he wasn't wearing his armor. He'd gotten cocky, assumed taking Oliver at home where his family was in the most danger would be enough, that it'd be *easy*… and maybe it would have been, if it'd just been Oliver, or just Ellie and Felicity…

The ghost of the gunshots ring in his ears as he stares at Slade's body.

He's not breathing, he's not moving…

It's done.

They're safe.

His family is safe.

"Oh thank god," Moira breathes, grabbing Oliver's arm, turning him to face her. She rests a hand on Oliver's cheek to gain his attention. "Oliver, are you-"

"I'm fine, I'm fine." He eyes the large gash on her forehead. It's already stopped bleeding, but it's left a thick stream of blood caked in her hair and across her face. He winces as he reaches for her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, don't worry about me," Moira says dismissively, her eyes on his throat. "I wasn't the one who almost died."

"I'm okay," Oliver assures her, his voice hoarse and uneven. "Thanks to you."

"I'm your *mother*, Oliver," she reminds him, affection heavy in her voice. "I'd do *anything* to protect you."

He believes her, with every ounce of his being. Oliver grins, an incredulous smile of amazement that she can still somehow make him feel like he's ten years old, and awe at the strength she wields.

Moira returns it, all maternal tenderness before she takes a deep breath, turning back to Slade. He follows her gaze.

"Now," she says, her tone regaining the cool manner that's usually reserved for a boardroom. "I'll make a call, to have this… problem cleaned up." She pats his arm. "You go check on Ellie and Felicity."

It's the only thing he wants to do - what he *needs* to do. He can still hear Ellie's cries for him, Felicity's frantic whispers as she tries to calm their daughter… but they aren't out of the clear yet.

"He's not dead," he informs her before the rest of her words register. Oliver starts, turning abruptly to stare at her. "You have someone who can *take care of a body?*"

She completely brushes off his concern with a, "Never mind that," before asking, "What do you mean he's not dead?" She laughs, and the sound comes out uncharacteristically nervous. "Oliver, no one could survive that."

"Yeah, well," Oliver says, "there's more to him than meets the eye."

He leans down to check Digg's pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when he finds it, strong and steady. As Moira asks, "Meaning what exactly?" his eye catches Raisa's arm on the other side of the kitchen island.

"Raisa," he breathes, instantly moving to check on her. Moira follows with a shocked, "Oh," as Oliver shifts her just enough to see if she's breathing… she is, and her pulse is present. Oliver breathes a sigh of relief.

"She's alright?" Moira inquires.

Oliver nods, unable to ignore the fact that Ellie and Felicity are somewhere in the mansion. The urge to find them is becoming almost unbearable, and seeing Raisa and Digg on the floor isn't helping a

damn bit.

"Yeah," he replies, focusing on assessing the damage. "I think he just knocked her out. Maybe broke her arm." He moves back towards Diggle. "And don't worry about Slade, I know someone who will be more than happy to take him off our hands."

"Oliver… darling…" Moira starts hesitantly, clearly trying to figure out how best to word what she's going to say next. "You're a wonderful man and clearly committed to doing the right thing. I respect that and I love you for it… but we really do need to kill him."

He blinks up at her from Digg's side.

"It's not cruelty," Moira assures him, misreading his look. "It's practicality. That man is going to want you and your daughter dead by his hand as long as he breathes. We need to end him. For good. For Ellie's sake."

There is no doubt at all that his mother is twisted in her logic, but she's also not exactly *wrong*. Oliver decides very quickly not to think too hard about what that says about him. Instead, he focuses on the impossibility of her suggestion.

"I've tried," Oliver tells her. "There's this… let's call it a drug. It keeps him alive, no matter what injury he sustains." He pauses, his eyes sliding to Slade. "I don't know how to kill him, not without reversing its effects."

"Then how do we do that?" Moira asks.

"I'm not sure yet," Oliver answers. "But I think I might have some friends who can help. First, though… we need to contain him."

With that, he pulls Digg's phone out of his pocket and punches a few buttons, never taking his eyes off of Slade's unmoving form. The phone rings twice before the line connects and a familiar voice greets him.

"Johnny, I've got a meeting in five minutes," Lyla says, her tone hurried. "What's up?"

"Sorry, Lyla," he replies. "It's Oliver."

The sudden lack of noise from her end of the line is incredibly telling. She's stopped walking, stopped *breathing* for a moment. Oliver hadn't

been aware that Digg was still seeing his ex-wife, but he'd have known based on her reaction to his unexpected call even if Ellie hadn't tipped them off.

"How bad?" Lyla asks, businesslike and focused.

"He's okay. Well, he will be okay," Oliver clarifies. "He's unconscious at the moment, but that's not why I'm calling…"

"Johnny's unconscious and there's *another* reason you're calling me?"

He can perfectly imagine the way her well-manicured eyebrows are undoubtedly raising in disbelief, and he knows he's stretching her patience.

"What has John told you about Slade Wilson?" Oliver questions.

"... Enough to know he should be a higher priority than Waller's making him," Lyla answers after a moment. "Why?"

"Think you could contain him?" Oliver asks.

Lyla's reply is immediate. "Do you *have* him?"

"If he were a normal person, he'd be dead on my mother's kitchen floor at the moment," Oliver tells her. "Instead, he's got a full clip in his chest and lost his other eye. He's down for the count, but he's still breathing."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Lyla says, hanging up the phone before Oliver has a chance to respond.

Oliver sighs, half in relief and half out of anxiety.

He has no idea how long they've got until Slade wakes up. He *has* to stay here. But, *god* does he want to go find Felicity and Ellie. With the immediate danger out of the way, he craves their presence, the solid reassurance that they're fine. It itches under his skin and makes his muscles twitch.

"Good news?" Moira asks, pulling him back.

"Yeah," Oliver agrees, standing back up, setting the phone on the counter. "Lyla… Digg's Lyla. She's got the resources to keep Slade under lock and key. She's on her way."

"And how precisely will she do that?" Moira asks, looking anything but

convinced. "Oliver, I'm certain she has the best of intentions, but if Slade Wilson can survive everything he's just endured, I can't imagine how anyone would be able to keep him imprisoned."

"Not every government agency has a name you'd recognize, mom," Oliver tells her with a heavy look. "Believe me, Lyla and her organization can handle this."

"You had better hope you're right," Moira replies gravely. "Because *everything* you have ever cared about rides on that man never getting free."

"Do you have a better idea?" Oliver asks her, watching her expectantly. "Because this is all I have."

Moira would look entirely composed and demure if there weren't blood drying beneath her nails. But Oliver sees it. He knows better.

"Surely there are some injuries *no one* could heal from," she suggests. "Regardless of whatever influences they're under."

"What exactly are you proposing?" Oliver asks, very much disliking the turn their conversation has taken, remembering vividly her comment about *calling* someone to clean up their 'problem.' The incredulity of that statement is fading away, leaving room for the reality of it: his mother has someone on speed dial who makes bodies disappear.

The implications of that are unsettling.

"Simply that," Moira replies, "if perhaps *parts* of him were… buried separately, there would be no way for him to survive."

Oliver blinks.

"Mom…" He closes his eyes, shaking his head. "This is *by far* the strangest conversation I've ever had. And that's taking into account that yesterday I told you I have a daughter who's time travelled from the future."

"Now isn't the time to be squeamish," Moira chastises, nonchalantly brushing dust off of his shoulder and he raises his eyebrows. *Squeamish?* "And it's not the time to trust other people to take care of our problems for us. Why don't you leave this to me. Call this… *Lyla* back, tell her you don't need her help, then go upstairs to your family. Leave Mr. Wilson in my hands."

She's serious. She's one hundred percent serious.

He's too tired to say anything but, "No, mom. I'm not going to go upstairs while you chop Slade into pieces, but thank you for offering."

"Oliver..." she begins, but is cut off by a groan.

Luckily for all of them, it's Diggle waking up and not the other unconscious man on the kitchen floor.

"Careful, John. Take it slow," Oliver says as his friend tries to sit up and nearly falls back down.

"Oh man," Diggle says, blinking into awareness. He winces, his hand flying to the back of his head. "What the hell happened?"

"Slade happened," Oliver replies.

The words startle Diggle enough that he's fully present in an instant. His eyes fly around the room, his shoulders stiff and ready for anything as he asks, "What happened? Is Ellie…?"

Just hearing his daughter's name makes Oliver's chest ache and he nods quickly. "She's okay, she's okay. Everything's okay now. Everybody's okay. Well…" He nods towards the bloodied body. "Except for Slade."

"Damn, Oliver," Diggle breaths as he takes in Slade's prone form. "Good work. It's about time we took him down." He grips Oliver's hand, letting his friend pull him to his feet. "We were due a win."

"Actually…" Oliver says, glancing at Moira. "My mother beat him."

Oliver's pretty sure that Diggle finds it more likely he's suffering from a concussion than that he heard him correctly, based on the way he freezes and his eyes dart between Oliver and Moira.

"That's…" Diggle starts, looking like he has no clue how to finish any semblance of a thought, "... *very* impressive, Mrs. Queen. How exactly did you manage that?"

"Everyone has their vulnerabilities, Mr. Diggle," she says, affecting her typical Queen Family Matriarch air. "Sometimes all you have to do is know precisely where to strike."

Diggle nods, blinking as he tries to wrap his head around that before raising both eyebrows and looking toward Oliver.

"Man, don't take this the wrong way, but your mom is terrifying. Promise me never to introduce her to Waller."

And *wow*, does that thought short-circuit Oliver's brain for a moment.

"Speaking of," he says, "Lyla's on her way to pick him up."

Diggle's eyes narrow warily. "Is ARGUS really the best place for him?"

"Thank you, Mr. Diggle," Moira says with a pointed look at Oliver.

"Mom…" Oliver says, raising a hand in her direction. "Don't start."

"You really want him in Waller's hands?" Diggle questions, giving Oliver a knowing glance. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with her holding the leash of a madman with superhuman powers, and it's not even my family he's targeting."

"I want him dead," Oliver says baldly. "If he's going to come after Ellie… if she's going to have to live with the threat of him hanging over her head her whole life…" He clenches his jaw, the very idea of it sending a surge of acid clawing up his throat. "I want him dead, John. But first… we need to find a cure for the mirakuru. He's not going to die otherwise."

"Yeah," Diggle breathes, his eyes switching back to Slade.

Oliver takes a deep breath. "And maybe…"

Diggle sighs, knowing exactly where he's going.

"Maybe if this crap is out of his system he'll go back to the way he was before," he says. "Maybe he won't be crazy. Maybe he won't hate you."

Oliver stares at Diggle, imploring him to understand where he's coming from. "I owe it to the friend I knew to *try*."

Diggle might get it, but his mother surely won't.

"Oliver," she sighs. "Your sentimentality is utterly mind-boggling."

He's saved from having to defend his position further by the distinctive sound of a helicopter settling down on their back lawn. *Lyla*. It's ARGUS, and for the first time since Oliver entered the kitchen to find Ellie in Slade's arms, he exhales in genuine relief.

They're *safe*.

Lyla's barely through the door to the kitchen before Oliver's focus redirects to the two women upstairs.

"Glad to see you're awake," Lyla says to Digg, eyes flickering over his form in equal parts appraisement and appreciation.

"Missed too much of the fight as it was," Diggle tells her. "I sure as hell wasn't gonna miss him being locked up for good."

Lyla reads between the lines like it's something she trained to do. And, considering her employer, maybe she is.

"I've got this, Johnny," she assures him. "We're going to stick him somewhere he'll never see the light of day again. I promise you that."

"Good," Diggle says. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

"You do that," Lyla replies with a wry grin.

With Slade effectively no longer a threat and no longer his responsibility, Oliver can't make himself stay in the room any longer, not with Felicity and Ellie worried about him upstairs… not when the last time he saw Ellie's little face it was filled with terror and covered in tears… not when the last time he heard Felicity, she was screaming his name with a desperate kind of primal fear.

"Lyla, thank you," Oliver says, and she nods in his direction, crossing the room to attach some sort of device around Slade's neck. "I need to go check on Ellie and Felicity."

"Who's Ellie?" Lyla asks.

"It's a long story," Diggle replies. "I'll fill you in later."

Whatever Lyla says in response, Oliver doesn't hear, and he doesn't care.

He jogs out of the kitchen in search of his girls.

They're in the house, he knows that much. The garage is off the kitchen and they wouldn't have been able to get to it without Slade seeing, and the basement is highly unlikely unless Felicity started opening every single door downstairs looking for it, which he knows she wouldn't do. Her priority would've been to get Ellie to safety, first and foremost, and anyone's natural instinct would have been to run to familiar ground.

They're not in his room or Thea's, or the half dozen guest rooms he tries. He starts opening and closing doors with more force than necessary, calling Felicity's name, followed by Ellie's, his rough voice echoing down the hall, getting nothing in return.

Where are they?

The mansion is huge, and it's full of tiny crevices and hiding spots… Felicity wouldn't leave the grounds, would she? Did she run out the front door? No, she doesn't have her car, and running barefoot down the graveled driveway to the street that's a easily twenty mile stretch to Starling City isn't feasible. She'd know that.

Oliver scours the entire second floor before moving up to the smaller third floor, wondering if he'd been too quick to assume Felicity would go upstairs. Maybe she knew familiar ground was exactly where Slade would check, and the second floor would be his first stop, so she'd done the exact opposite, heading down instead of up…

He's opening one of the dusty storage rooms near the attic, ready to give up and check downstairs when he hears it…

A tiny whimper, followed by an even softer hushing noise.

"Oh god," he whispers, relief flooding his chest as he dives for the closed bathroom door. When he opens it - when he sees them - it drives home exactly how terrifying all of this has truly been.

They're huddled in an antique bathtub, Ellie curled up on Felicity's lap, crying softly into the fabric of her shirt as Felicity holds a gun aimed steadily at the doorway. It's ancient; it probably doesn't even have bullets and almost certainly wouldn't shoot - he's almost positive it was his grandfather's once upon a time, and that it used to be on display in his mother's office - but none of that matters.

The sharp squeak of Felicity's feet on the porcelain tub sounds as she pushes herself back, shielding Ellie, ready to do *anything*…

The instant she registers it's him at the door, Felicity gasps. Her hand sags, the heavy gun falling from trembling fingers, landing on the floor with a thud.

"Oliver," she sobs, her face crinkling in relief, joy and fear.

If it's anything like the fear he'd felt downstairs, he can only *imagine* what hers is: fear that she wasn't going to see him again, that he was

dead, that her last minutes were going to be filled with her daughter crying into her chest, both of them just *waiting*, waiting to be found, for god knows what to happen…

"Felicity," he whispers as she scrambles to her feet, Ellie still in her arms.

Oliver launches himself towards the tub, catching her just as she reaches for him. He hauls them up into his arms, not feeling his bruised throat, or what might be a broken rib, or his sore jaw...

He only feels *them*, and it's the best damn feeling in the entire *world*.

"Oh god, Oliver," Felicity says, desperation lacing her words, tears staining her cheeks. She pushes her face into his chest, inhaling, breathing him in and he does the same, pressing a hard kiss to the top of her head. She pulls him closer, shaking her head - she's *trembling* - as she whispers, "Oh god, I thought I wasn't… that you… I wasn't sure if I was going to see you again. And Ellie…"

"Felicity," he rasps, hugging her tighter, making Ellie yelp. He instantly releases them, looking down at his girls. "You're okay, you're okay."

"Oh, Oliver," Felicity whispers, her lip quivering as her eyes rove over him. He can only imagine the damage on his throat, much less where he'd taken a few solid hits to the face. She reaches up with her free hand, her fingers hovering over him. "Are you…?"

"I'm okay," he replies, nodding.

"And Slade?" she asks. "He's...?"

"He's gone," Oliver confirms and she lets out a shuddery sigh of relief. "And… you? You're okay, nothing…?"

"We're okay," she says, looking down at Ellie, who's been uncharacteristically silent. Felicity inhales deeply as she hoists their daughter up a little bit. Her voice is thick with tears, but it's strong as she says, "We have one brave little girl here. She was keeping *me* calm."

"Hey, honey," Oliver says, leaning down so he's level with her. He wants to ask her if she's okay, but he knows it's a stupid question, one he doesn't want to hear her answer anyway. Instead he smiles, meeting her gaze. "Hi, sweetie."

"Hi, daddy." Ellie's voice is small, tears shimmering in her eyes. They don't fall though as she takes in Oliver's injuries. He wants to hide them, to tell her he's fine… but he doesn't, because they both know he'd be lying.

"Is the bad man gone?" she finally asks.

Oliver's heart breaks, that that's the first thing she asks, that she knows exactly what she's asking him. A quiet sniffle from Felicity tells him she feels the exact same way, and while something deep inside him twists at the thought that this is the life he's given his daughter, there's something else too… something more.

Pride.

Elizabeth 'Ellie' Queen is only halfway to being four years old and already she's ranked among the bravest people he's ever met. This is the life he gives her, because this is who he is, who Felicity is… but they raise a little girl who is more than capable of handling it.

And that heals his heart just as quickly.

"Yeah, baby," Oliver replies, his voice cracking. "He's gone."

Ellie nods, her eyes dropping to his mottled throat. "Are you okay?"

He smiles, his eyes slipping shut, nodding shortly before saying, "I will be. I promise."

"Okay," Ellie says, believing him, and before he can blink, she's launching herself out of Felicity's arms and into his.

He doesn't care how badly he's hurt, or that her arms wrapping around his neck make his eyes water and his lungs seize… he doesn't *care*, because his daughter is in his arms, and she's okay, and that's all that matters.

Oliver hugs her, cradling her close, turning his face into her little neck, taking a deep breath.

Home.

"C'mere," Oliver whispers, wrapping his arm around Felicity, pulling her into his embrace. She smiles as she holds both of them, her eyes shiny with tears. He returns it, his own tears blurring his vision as he presses a kiss to her forehead before leaning down to kiss her lips

properly.

He's home.

Chapter 11

The shower going in the background is the only sound in the room. It echoes Ellie's soft breathing, highlighting the silent house. Moira had gone to the hospital with Raisa to make sure she was settled and to get the nasty gash on her own head checked - Oliver had declined to go, despite both Felicity and Moira's protests - and John had left with Lyla, to help with Slade, the ARGUS helicopter making the walls shake slightly…

Leaving just them.

Felicity sits with her back against the sofa in the pillow fort, her legs tucked up against her chest, her arms wrapped around her knees. It's only been a couple of hours since she'd woken up to the sound of Ellie's giggling and Oliver's hushed whispers, but it feels longer than that, like an entire year has passed in the space of a few minutes. Fear does that, she supposes, makes time get wonky. Or wonkier, as it were, in their case.

The midday sun shining through the large picture windows in Oliver's room warms the little space through the gunmetal sheet, lighting it up in a dusky gray that makes the feeling of being cocooned even more prevalent.

She can't take her eyes off Ellie where she's fast asleep, tucked in against the extra pillows from the sofa in the little makeshift bed her daughter had put together after their shower.

Ellie had been quiet, ever since Oliver had found them, only speaking up when they'd crawled into her pillow castle.

"*Can we do story time, momma?"*

The request had thrown her and it'd taken Felicity a second to respond. She'd been waiting for Ellie to say something, to say anything - she wasn't sure what she was more afraid of, her asking questions she couldn't possibly answer, or her not saying anything at all.

But then Ellie had cuddled up in the pillows, wrapping herself up in an afghan, asking for a story about the warrior queen who defeated the bad magician, and it'd been surprisingly easy to do exactly what the little girl was asking.

Maybe they did this when something bad happened, to bring some levity to a situation that was the exact opposite of that.

"The warrior queen, huh?" Felicity had asked as she'd pressed the blanket in tighter around the little girl.

"Yep. Warrior Queen Nyssa."

Nyssa… like League of Assassins, terrifying warrior Nyssa? Daughter to Ra's Al Ghul, Heir to the Demon Nyssa? That's who she has guest-starring in her daughter's bedtime stories?

"How about we skip the warrior stories today," Felicity had said. When Ellie's face had dropped slightly, she'd quickly added, "And talk about the mischievous code frog?"

"That's the story gramma tells when she watches me."

The thought of her mother telling her daughter bedtime stories makes her chest clench with an affection she's never felt before.

Felicity had laid down next to Ellie as she'd said, "She used to tell me that story too."

"I know. Gramma says you made your own mischievous code frog when you were little."

Felicity had laughed - both at the memory and at the way Ellie trips over the word 'mischievous.' "I did. Do you wanna hear about that?"

"Okay."

Ellie had fallen asleep after barely a minute.

Felicity had wanted to follow her. She wanted to lay down and cuddle up with her daughter, holding onto her as tight as she could, and fall asleep to the sound of her steady heartbeat…

But she'd been afraid if she closed her eyes…

No.

That wouldn't happen, because she was okay, they were all okay.

Ever since Oliver had found them, since she'd seen that he was alive and well and heard that Slade was gone, Felicity had steeled herself, pushing her tears back - it was time to *rejoice*, not freak out… but

watching her daughter sleeping peacefully, watching her little chest rise and fall, her soft eyelashes brushing her beautiful cheeks, she hadn't been able to hold them back.

She's still here.

When a quiet sob had slipped past Felicity's lips, Ellie had shifted, turning towards her, like she could feel her turmoil. Felicity had smiled, tears blurring her vision as she'd cupped her little cheek, brushing her thumb over her soft brow. She was so perfect, so unbelievably perfect… and she'd almost…

Another sob had Felicity sitting up, pushing herself back before she woke Ellie up and there she'd stayed, unable to take her eyes off her.

She's *exhausted.* Mentally. Physically. Forget that she'd gotten up just a few hours ago and that she'd slept more last night than she had in months. The instant she'd heard those gunshots in the kitchen, the instant they'd rushed in there and seen Ellie in Slade's arms…

Felicity closes her eyes, trying to push the image away, but it's branded in her mind. It's going nowhere, and she knows she'll remember it for the rest of her life.

But that wasn't even the worse part.

No, that had come when Slade's hand had wrapped around Oliver's throat, literally squeezing the life out of him… and Ellie had *flickered*.

Felicity's throat closes at the memory and she digs her nails into her arms until it passes, but it won't go away.

She'd never felt the kind of terror that had swamped her in that moment as she'd looked down, watching her daughter literally *fade away*.

As Oliver's struggles had started to lessen, as his body had grown limp, the weight of Ellie in her arms had lessened, disappearing until she almost didn't feel her for a moment.

She'd *flickered*, right before her eyes, like a messy wave of color…

Disappearing from existence.

Felicity had screamed for Oliver. She couldn't lose *both* of them, and while logic had told her that of course that was what was happening -

that without Oliver in this time, there'd be no Ellie in the future - she couldn't stop from rallying, from fighting, for her family, for the man she loved, for the daughter she was going to have with him…

And then Moira had shoved a butcher's knife right into Slade's eye, and the second he dropped Oliver, Ellie was *back*, solid and sure and *there*.

Had Ellie recognized what was happening? Had she known that something was wrong, had she seen her world fading around her as her father struggled for his life? Her daughter's desperate screams for Oliver still echoed in her ears, and she knew it was fear from watching Slade hurting him just as much as a fear that something wasn't right.

That she'd almost disappeared, even if she couldn't grasp the concept in the least.

Felicity takes a steadying breath, vaguely hearing the shower shut off.

Her eyes never leave her daughter.

Ellie's still here, she still happens.

Felicity slides her foot across the carpet and under the afghan, touching Ellie's leg with her toes.

She's solid.

Tears burn her eyes and a large lump starts to crowd her throat, making it hard to breathe again… but she pushes it down, forcing herself to inhale.

They're okay, they're all okay, and that's all that matters.

Ellie's okay.

Felicity's so intent on her daughter that she doesn't hear the sound of the bathroom door opening or Oliver's feet shuffling over the ground as he moves around the room for a minute before making his way towards her.

She doesn't hear him until his soft, "Felicity?" as he gently pulls the sheet up.

Felicity jumps with a startled gasp, her heart leaping up her throat as she spins to face him, her hand flying to cover her chest. She's already moving towards Ellie, to protect her, hearing nothing but the sound of

blood in her ears until she registers who it is.

Oliver instantly freezes where he's poked his head into the pillow fort. He doesn't move for a second as she just stares at him, and then he finally whispers, "Hey… it's just me."

His voice breaks through the white noise in her head, and Felicity closes her eyes with a breathy, "God," before letting out an abrupt little laugh, looking back at him. Her hand's still on her chest; her heart's *pounding*. She nods. "I knew that, I'm sorry."

"No." Oliver shakes his head, getting down on his knees tenderly. "You don't need to apologize, it's more than understandable."

He looks at Ellie, his face softening as he tries to crawl into the fort with them. *Try* being the operative word. He's a mess of bruises and welts, and she can only imagine what the rest of him looks like under his sweats and t-shirt. He's wincing, every movement clearly causing him pain.

Felicity's hand lands on his shoulder without a second thought, stopping him.

Oliver looks at her with startled eyes. "What?"

"What are you doing?" she says, keeping her voice just as low as his.

"I'm…" He furrows his brow, and she can see the wheels turning in his head. "Did you… want to be alone, or…?"

"No," Felicity replies quickly. "No, no, I really don't want to be alone. I just meant… you need to be in a bed. You can barely stand much less crawl around in tiny pillow forts that are clearly made for Ellie-sized people."

"I'm fine," he says, trying to crawl in again but she's having none of it, stopping him again. He's in no position to push past her though. "Felicity…"

"Did you wrap your ribs?" she asks. "Or at least tape them?"

"Felicity." Oliver gives her a level look but she can see the hint of exasperation, and it makes her clench her teeth. "I'm *fine*."

"You do realize the term 'fine' doesn't include nearly *dying*, right?" she retorts, her voice rising, each word coming out sharper than the last.

"Because last time I checked, a maniac nearly choking you to death does not leave you in any way, shape or form '*fine*,' Oliver."

The silence that follows is deafening.

Felicity blinks, barely breathing as Oliver stares at her with an unreadable expression. Almost like she can still hear the words reverberating around them, she looks to see if she woke Ellie, but the toddler's still sound asleep.

Her eyes find his again, and when she sees his frown, her shoulders drop, highlighting just how tense her muscles are. "I'm sorry, that was…"

"Stop saying you're sorry, Felicity," Oliver replies, sounding as tired as she feels. With another wince, he backs out, waving for her to follow him with a soft, "C'mon."

Felicity looks at Ellie, feeling the nearly irresistible urge to stay right there for the rest of eternity, but another urge, just as irresistible, pulls at her to follow him. They need to talk, but she also wants to make sure he's okay. She follows him out, moving with a swiftness Oliver definitely does not have as he's barely pushing himself to his feet by the time she's out.

He doesn't give her a second to chastise him for thinking it was a good idea to be crawling on his hands and knees - especially a very injured knee. Instead, he grabs her hand, pulling her close.

"Oliver," she starts, trying to take it back, but he doesn't let her. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," he replies, moving to hold her but she stops him.

"Oliver…"

Felicity presses against his chest lightly, and they both know it's not just his wounds.

"You're right," he says, and she pauses. Oliver takes advantage of it, wrapping his arms around her. He pushes his hands up her back, his fingers tangling in her still-wet hair, his face tightening with pain. "I'm not fine."

Felicity bites the inside of her lip, fighting the tears that well at his words, before replying, "Yeah, well, I suppose that depends on which

kind of fine you're talking about." She gives him a tight smile before looking at his chest. Her mind automatically fills in the injuries she knows he has under his shirt as she continues, her voice a little higher, "Because what I'm seeing is very fine. Very muscle-y. Very fine."

Oliver smiles, like he knows exactly what she's doing.

"And I can't believe I can actually say that now," she continues with a nod, "and not feel like I just word vomited all over the place. Well, it's still word vomit I guess, but it's a little more intentional… although that makes it sound like all the other times *were* intentional, which they weren't. Or maybe they were. I don't know." Felicity looks up to find him staring at her and her babble fades away. "What?"

"I should be the one saying I'm sorry," he says, cupping her cheek.

"Oliver," she whispers, closing her eyes, "that's not what I meant."

"I know," he responds, brushing his thumb over her bottom lip. "But I should be. I should be apologizing for everything. For bringing you into this, for going to you when I got shot that day, for…"

"For not realizing that this is my life, and it's my choice to be with you," Felicity interrupts, her voice hard, and when Oliver's eyebrows shoot up, she's too on edge to wonder if it's because of her words or because she keeps biting his head off; either way, she doesn't care enough to be embarrassed. "Because it is, you know. My choice. To be here. With you."

His eyes dance over her face, taking her in as he whispers, "I know."

"And if that's really what this is about…"

"It's not," Oliver interrupts. "I almost died this morning, Felicity."

Felicity stiffens. "Yeah. I know." She bows her head. "I was there, remember?"

"Hey," he whispers, tilting her face back up to his. She doesn't realize there's tears in her eyes until she sees how blurry he is. "I can't count how many times I've almost died." Her chest tightens and Felicity furrows her brow to keep the tears at bay - this is *so* not what she wants to hear right now. "How many times I've been so close I could *taste* it... I could see it… or how many times I wished something was there to just push me over, to get it over with."

"Oliver," Felicity breathes, a tear slipping down her cheek. Does he think this is making it better, easier for her?

His thumb catches the tear, his eyes becoming glassy with his own… but he's smiling.

"But it was different, this morning. It wasn't just because it was Slade and everything that's happened between us, or that…"

He presses his lips into a thin white line, and for the first time she sees his struggle for the right words. She tentatively rests her hands on his chest - his heart is pounding. Oliver takes a deep breath and leans in, touching his forehead to hers.

"It was different because I almost lost *you*. And Ellie." His voice cracks and he takes a quick breath. "I almost lost you both before I even really had you."

A soft sob slips past her lips, a shiver falling down her spine and Felicity inhales quickly to hide it, squeezing her eyes shut - *this*, this is definitely too much, she can't hear this right now, but he's having none of it.

Oliver hears her and takes a shaky breath, cupping her face with both hands. He kisses her forehead for a long moment and then he moves down, dropping a soft kiss on her brow, her nose, her cheek before pressing his forehead against hers again.

She should say something, she should tell him she knows *exactly* what he's talking about, but she can't… because if she does, if she opens the gates to that, she doesn't think she could get them closed again, and the idea of letting him see *everything* like that is *terrifying*.

A small part of her takes a second to marvel at the fact that it's Oliver pushing this, being so *open*, talking about his feelings… even his heart is calm again, beating slowly under her palm.

She's the one who feels like running.

Felicity thinks back to when she told him about Thea, about her family… about losing someone that means that much to her again.

She had *no idea* what she was talking about, no idea how much Oliver really meant to her…

How much *Ellie* means to her.

"I want to be sorry that this is the life that I give you," he continues, "that I brought you into this, that this is the world we have Ellie in, but… I'm not." He pauses, and she doesn't have to open her eyes to see he's smiling as he says, "Because then I wouldn't have you… I wouldn't have the family you give me."

"God, Oliver," Felicity manages, shaking her head. She tries to take a deep breath, tries to get her thoughts in order, to *process*, to think, to *feel*…

"*Because then I wouldn't have you… I wouldn't have the family you give me."*

She wants to say more, she wants to tell him more, but the words are stuck in her throat. He's giving her so much, trying to meet her halfway, trying to understand how she's feeling, to tell her that he feels the same. She *knows* what he's doing, but she nearly lost everything just a few hours after getting it *all*, and while Oliver is sitting here talking about how grateful he is that he has her, she's…

What?

She doesn't know, she doesn't know how she feels - she can't *think*.

Felicity doesn't want him to go away - that's the last thing she wants, but the idea of continuing on, of giving him more… She's scared, at the depth of her feelings, of how much he means to her, how much he's always meant to her, and *Ellie*… that's in another *realm*.

He waits, letting her think, and she's not sure how much time passes, how long they stand there, holding each other. It feels like forever, but it's probably only a minute because suddenly Oliver lets out a breathy chuckle as he whispers, "This would probably sound a lot better if I wasn't lisping."

It has the desired effect, shattering the heaviness of the moment with a few simple words.

Felicity laughs, the sound coming out in a choked moan, and he chuckles again. She steps closer to him, curling into him, and she feels his heart pick up again as she leans into his touch.

He slides his fingers up into her hair, cradling her as she decides to just *say it*.

"It's not just… that," she whispers. "Or us."

His heart jumps under her palm, but he doesn't say anything.

"It was *both* of you."

Oliver pulls back to look at her and she chances a glance at him. His brow is furrowed, and she sees the realization slowly growing as he turns her words over in his mind. She can't blame him; it's hard to wrap her *own* mind around - Ellie *exists* here and now, in this time - she's *real* - but she's from the future, which means if Oliver dies *now*… there's no them, or her.

Felicity's not sure she would've let herself think about it until she'd seen her daughter flickering out of existence… she probably would have wondered how the time consequences would have worked, if Ellie was still in their time - would it mean she was permanently there, would she become a paradox, or would she fade Back-to-the-Future-style - but either way, it's *nothing* compared to actually seeing her daughter disappear.

"I couldn't lose both of you, Oliver, and I almost did."

"What?" he whispers, his eyes searching hers, his hands brushing her hair off her face.

"She *flickered*," Felicity says, her voice cracking as a tears burn her eyes. The second the words hit Oliver he stiffens, a pain she's never seen filling his eyes. "She… she flickered, when Slade was…"

She can't even say the words. Felicity closes her eyes, sending hot tears streaming down her cheeks, her mind slipping back to what it'd been like to see Oliver dangling from Slade's grasp, his face turning red and then purple as he struggled for air, as he tried to push Slade away, to save himself… and then…

"I was so scared… she was disappearing, and oh god, she was terrified, Oliver. She was so scared and I didn't know what to do, because it wasn't just… *her*, it was *you*… and then when your mom... "

Felicity laughs incredulously.

"When your mom *stabbed* him in the eye, she was back. She was *back* and solid and *here*..." She meets his gaze and her heart breaks when she sees exactly what she's feeling reflected back at her. The sudden urge to protect him from this rises in her and she almost tells him that was it, but she can't. She needs him to know just as much as he needs to hear it. "And you were okay, you were *okay*, but Slade was still

there and Ellie was screaming for you… so I ran. The second she was back, I didn't even think about staying, Oliver, I didn't think about anything but getting Ellie out of there, like maybe if I got her far away enough it wouldn't happen again, that she'd be okay…"

The words are tumbling out in a rush, but she can't stop, she doesn't want to stop. Now that she's opened the gates, she needs it out, she needs it all out, she needs to tell him everything.

"I left you and your mom and I ran."

His voice is rough as says, "Felicity…"

"I didn't know where to go or where to hide, I didn't know what was happening, if Slade was going to win or… or if he was going to kill you." Her words crack. "And I didn't get to tell you how I feel or how happy I was this morning when everything was perfect, and suddenly everything was falling apart and I didn't know what to do."

Oliver lets out a tiny sound of pain and wraps his arms around her waist, nearly pulling her off her feet in his haste to hold her. Felicity buries her face in his neck as she continues, her voice thick with the tears wetting his skin.

"I went upstairs, and I found that old gun, and I knew it was probably useless but it was *something* and I needed something…

"But then nothing happened - *nothing* happened - and I was sitting there with Ellie and she was crying, she was so scared, and I felt so alone, and the entire time I was holding onto her, waiting for her to disappear again because… because I didn't know if…"

"Oh Felicity," Oliver breathes, hugging her tighter and she clings to him with a shuddering sob. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"And then I heard the gunshots, a lot of them, and I wanted to see if you were okay because my mind started thinking up all these horrible things, like maybe *you* got shot, but were still alive, that was why Ellie was still there, but what if you were bleeding out, what if you were dying, and would she disappear again, and I didn't know, but then I didn't want… if Slade… I didn't want him to find us, or *see* us, and…"

"I didn't even think, Felicity, god..." he whispers, his hand sliding up her back to the back of her neck, pressing her closer, and the way he grips her, almost too tight, tells her he's back in the kitchen with Slade. "When Slade… when he had me, you were the only thing I was

thinking about, Felicity, you and Ellie… and I kept hearing her screaming, I kept seeing her in his arms - she was so *tiny* - and I had to make sure that she was okay, that nothing would happen to her, not ever again…"

He pauses, and she knows.

"Even if that meant I had to die."

Felicity holds him tighter, because of course that's what he was thinking; that's who he is, that's the kind of man he is, and it's part of why she loves him so much...

But what about her?

Felicity instantly feels selfish and ridiculous, because it's a choice she would have made in an instant, no questions asked… but that doesn't make being on the other side any easier.

What would have happened to her if Oliver had died, if Ellie had disappeared, if Slade had taken them both from her? Would he have killed Moira next, and then her? But what if she'd survived, what if the second Oliver was gone, after he'd gotten what he wanted… would he have disappeared, leaving her and Moira?

What about her?

It takes her a second to realize he's trembling, and when she does, she slides a hand up his neck, pressing her fingers through his damp hair.

He takes a deep breath, letting it out in a shaky exhale. "But if that'd been you, if you'd done that, Felicity, I wouldn't have…"

"I know," Felicity whispers, nodding, closing her eyes, pressing her face into his hair. "I know."

A long moment passes, and they just hold each other, finding solace - finding relief - in each other.

Oliver buries his face in the crook of her neck. "I'm sorry I didn't find you earlier. I had to make sure Slade was taken care of, I couldn't leave him there without making sure he was down, especially with my mom..."

"I know that, Oliver, and I am the last person who would want you to." Felicity furrows her brow, pulling back to look at him. "I didn't

have that massive freakout on you because I was trying to make you feel guilty."

A small smile tugs at his lips, sliding his hands up her arms. "I know that."

Not less than twenty-fours ago, he would have had a very different response, and so would she, because right now, she believes him. Oliver 'I-wear-my-guilt-like-a-shawl' Queen just skipped right over a perfect guilt opportunity, and even if she hadn't said it to make him feel worse than he already did, he could have easily taken that on.

It's another reminder how much has changed, not only around them but between them… and it's barely been a day. *One day*. What's the rest of their lives like, especially with a second kid on the way?

God, if this is how their lives are every day, the sex must be amazing.

Oliver chuckles.

Felicity closes her eyes, scrunching up her face. "I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

With a heavy sigh, she lets her head fall back… but the only thing she can think is how good it feels to stretch her neck muscles.

"It's probably because we just had the morning from literal hell that I can't bring myself to care," she says.

Oliver smiles again, a softer one that reaches his eyes, that erases all the pain and discomfort right off his face - her own special '*Felicity'* smile - and the air suddenly feels lighter.

Felicity takes a deep breath, because she can. The band of fear that'd been wrapped around her chest is gone, and when she exhales, Oliver slides his hands over her shoulders and down her arms, tangling his fingers with her.

"Let's lay down. Take a nap," he whispers and she's nodding before she's even processed the words completely, because that sounds like exactly what she needs - what they both need. They may have woken up a few hours ago but she feels like she's been awake for three days straight.

He pulls her towards the bed and she definitely does not miss his wince at the simple movement.

"Oliver," she says, stopping him. "Let me at least wrap your ribs."

"They're really not that bad."

Felicity's already shaking her head, dropping his hand, turning to the bathroom. She hears him sigh behind her as she wipes the drying tears off her face and grabs the first aid kit she'd spied last night. It's seriously lacking in supplies, but it at least has an Ace bandage, which will do just fine.

She leaves the kit behind and is already unraveling the wrap as she walks back out, but Oliver isn't where she left him. Instead he's leaning over to look into the pillow fort, his body stiff like even that is too much strain, as he pokes his head under the sheet, checking on Ellie.

He's moving slowly, as if the sound of the sheet moving might wake her, which is just silly since her parents had just been standing right outside having an emotional conversation that more than rivaled every single emotional moment in Felicity's life.

"Still asleep?" she asks.

"Yeah," he replies, gingerly letting the sheet back down. He turns to her and she motions to the bed. He sits down, already working on tugging his shirt over his head. The instant he gets it to his ribs, he winces and she gets a glimpse of the damage.

He should be doing more than *wincing*.

There's an ugly patch of discolored skin over his entire side, right where Slade had hit him more than once. It extends down, wrapping around his back, and she can only imagine what his kidneys look like, remembering with vivid alacrity the sound of Slade's fist landing on his tender flesh.

At her gasp, Oliver grits his teeth and yanks the shirt off the rest of the way, letting a pained breath out as he says, "It looks worse that it is."

"I really, really doubt that," Felicity replies, and as she unravels the wrap some more, her hands are shaking. She steps into his space with a soft, "Arms up," and he instantly complies, his eyes never leaving her face as she concentrates on wrapping his ribs.

It's not perfect, it probably won't help that much, but it's *something* and it makes her feel better.

A small rush of gratefulness fills her chest, realizing that he's only doing this for her.

"What?" he asks, and she wonders what he sees on her face.

Felicity shakes her head with a little smile, meeting his eyes, "Nothing."

He hums, not believing her, but he recognizes it isn't anything worth pushing. But there is something they should talk about.

"How's your mom taking all of this?" she asks.

Oliver snorts, which makes him wince, and he glances down to check her progress. "She's taking it just fine, I think."

"What does that mean?"

"That means," Oliver says, "that she thought my asking Lyla to come pick up Slade wasn't enough. She had… other ideas about how to *eliminate* the problem."

Felicity stops to look at him. "Eliminate, like… eliminate-eliminate?"

Oliver nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, it wouldn't be the *worst* plan…"

"Eliminate like calling someone she knows to cut his body up into tiny pieces, eliminate."

She can only blink. Should it worry her that she's not even a little bit surprised?

"Yeah," he repeats, seeing her face.

"Okay then. Your mother is doing a great job of maintaining her 'Scariest Person Ever' title - which is saying something considering who showed up this morning."

He huffs out a tired, disbelieving chuckle, like he's *still* trying to wrap his head around it.

Felicity finishes up the wrap with flourish, stepping back to check her

work. It's not that great, and she purses her lips, giving him a look.

"We really need to restock that kit," she says, tucking in a loose end of the wrap.

Oliver smiles. "We'll keep that in mind for next time."

Next time.

Her stomach sinks, the same fear from earlier crawling up her throat and she unconsciously glances at the tent, feeling the urge to go over and make sure Ellie's still there. She is, she *knows* she is…

She sees Oliver follow her gaze from the corner of her eye as his hand captures hers.

"Do you think it gets easier?" she asks.

"No," Oliver replies instantly.

Felicity bites her lip, her voice shaky as she says, "And I'm pregnant when we send her back." His fingers tighten around hers and she holds him back just hard. "I'm on the verge of a heart attack right now and that's with just Ellie."

"I don't think we'd be having another baby if we didn't think we could handle it," he says softly and she laughs, shaking her head before looking back at him.

"You know, it's really weird that I'm the one freaking out and you're so calm about this," she says.

He huffs out a laugh, but that's not enough because it's *weird*. She's the calm, level one, right? At least she thought she was, while Oliver was the 'react with the most radical emotions ever' one.

"I guess I could be freaking out about normal things," Felicity continues, "like, 'How do we afford all those diapers,' especially since you're *technically* broke right now since Isabel took everything and I don't have a job anymore, and oh god, I don't have a job anymore." Her eyes widen. "How are we going to pay for anything, how are we going to take care of her - how do we take care of *two* babies? And that's not even counting keeping them *alive* because we're constantly running around with our vigilante signs on our backs and-"

"Hey, hey, Felicity," Oliver interrupts, tugging on her hand. "Take a

breath."

She does, inhaling too quickly, which makes Oliver chuckle. His eyes on her, he takes a deep breath, as deep as he can with his ribs, and this time she follows his lead. He does it again, and with the second breath, she feels *some* calm seeping in.

"First of all," Oliver says, pulling her closer. "You said Ellie mentioned you have an entire company in the future. I'm pretty sure we aren't broke."

"Right. Right, duh, of course," Felicity says.

Oliver chuckles quietly, a wistful look crossing his face. He stares at her for a beat before saying, "How about we take a little time to get to know what *we* feel like before we start freaking out about the price of diapers and college?"

"I'm pretty sure we got a good idea of that this morning," Felicity replies cheekily, earning her a smile and what might even be a blush.

"You know what I mean," Oliver says. "Take some time for… us. Learn what we're like." He pauses, and he bites his lip. "As a... couple."

"A couple," she repeats slowly, letting that sink in. Right, a couple, of course. Because they're probably a couple - of *course* they're a couple in the future, that's a dumb thing to think - but right now? Right now it's… well, it's still a little shocking. "You and me. As a couple."

"Yeah." Oliver spreads his legs, pulling her between them. "Like… people who… do things… together."

When Felicity smiles again, it's more natural, relaxed and even a little bit amused at his tentative words as she puts her hands on Oliver's shoulders. "People who do things together, huh?"

"Yeah," he says, nodding, his hands landing on her waist. He licks his lips the instant he touches her and a light flush creeps over her skin, her breath catching at the familiar way he holds her. He smiles, a soft little smile that almost looks playful as he says, "Like… stuff, like… food."

"Food…"

"Together."

"So eating food together?" Felicity teases, cupping his neck.

"Yeah." When she doesn't respond, he presses his lips together. "Like dinner."

"Dinner. Like a date?" The instant the word leaves her mouth, the reality of it slams into her and she blinks. "A real date. A date-date."

"Well, yeah, I mean... " Oliver's mouth opens without a single sound and Felicity raises her eyebrows as he struggles. "The implication with dinner being that you… that there are…"

"Usually I'm the one talking in sentence fragments," she whispers, cutting him off with a tiny smile.

It's small… but hopeful.

She almost lost everything just a few short hours ago, but now she has it all back, all of it. The idea that she could lose it all again - lose *them* again - is still terrifying, but with Oliver there, with the way he's looking up at her…

Oliver stops, staring at her for a beat with what she might start terming his 'dopey face' before a grin crosses his lips, one that makes her heart skip a beat.

"So dinner…" Felicity says before he can speak.

"Dinner," he confirms.

"Dinner…" Felicity pauses, and for a reason she can't even begin to explain, she ducks her head with a blush.

Suddenly looking at him is too much, like *seeing* him staring at her is too much, like she didn't sleep in the same bed with him or make out with him that morning or they didn't just find out they have a child together - with another on the way - in the future.

Felicity smiles at her feet for a second before meeting his eyes again, and her smile grows when she sees the way he's looking at her.

"Dinner sounds good," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Oliver takes a deep breath, his eyes never leaving hers and then he nods, smiling. "Good."

"But not… tonight, right? Not that I don't want to, because I do, I really do, but you don't exactly look like you'd be up for it, and what would we do with Ellie? Even if we could go tonight... I don't want to leave her."

"Not tonight," Oliver says, shaking his head. "Definitely not tonight, I don't want to leave her either, or… the house, actually." He huffs out a little sound, and she knows he's wondering when the last time he'd actually wanted to stay home was. "She needs us after everything that happened this morning, and I don't want to ruin anymore of her normal than we already have." Felicity smiles at that, her heart skipping a beat for no other reason than realizing once more how incredible this man is. "And even though Slade isn't a problem anymore, he's hardly the only threat out there. So, not tonight. But soon?"

Not even the allusion to Isabel can dim her mood at the moment.

"I'll make sure to keep my calendar cleared for 'soon'," Felicity replies, biting her bottom lip at the promise in her words.

He grins.

It suddenly hits her that she's seen Oliver Queen smile more in the last day than she has in the entire time she's known him.

Whoa.

"So," Felicity says, "if I remember correctly, I think I heard you mention a nap." She closes her eyes. "It may have only been a day, but parenting is *exhausting*."

When he doesn't respond right away, she opens her eyes. He's just looking at her, and she has to fight the urge to look away at the earnestness she sees in his face.

He's is looking at her like she's hung the moon, and it's… *intense.*

Oliver finally nods with a quiet, "That sounds perfect."

This time Felicity can't stop the little smile tugging at her lips as she ducks her head. She steps back, helping him stand before looking at the bed - it's still rumpled from that morning. Oliver doesn't give her a

second to second-guess anything. He pulls the comforter back and climbs in… but he doesn't go to the other side or make room for her. He's already claimed a side.

They have sides.

Whoa.

Would there ever come a time when she didn't feel the urge to whisper, '*Whoa,'* whenever he did or said something?

Something tells her no.

With a delicate smile, Felicity climbs onto the bed, gingerly moving around him until she's on her end. She wiggles her way under the comforter… and then she pauses, frowning. Oliver reaches for her but he stops when he sees her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Definitely nothing. I was just…" She points at his chest. "I don't want to hurt you."

With a small roll of his eyes, Oliver moves closer to her again as he says, "There's no world where you could hurt me, Felicity."

"What if I'm a kicker in my sleep and I don't know it?" she asks. "And we both find out the hard way when I knee you right in your broken ribs?"

"Okay, well, first, they aren't broken…"

"Oh, you have an x-ray machine hiding in the bathroom?"

"No," he replies, giving her a level look. "I know what broken ribs feel like. But also, you're not a kicker." Oliver smiles, and it's almost salacious as he finishes with, "Trust me."

They'd already slept together… with each other… *near* each other.

"Right," Felicity breathes. "Okay. But you have to tell me if I'm hurting you."

"I will," he says, reaching for her and she scoots over before hesitating again. "What?"

"You keep saying I won't hurt you, but if I even wrap my arms around

you…"

"C'mere," Oliver cuts in, grabbing her arm with a grimace, tugging her towards the center of the bed. She goes along, not sure what he's doing until he slides down the bed a bit and wraps his arms around her waist… like he's going to lay on her. Her heart picks up when she realizes what he's doing and she must have stiffened because he pauses, looking at her. "Is this okay?"

The simple question and the quiet way he asks makes something deep inside her melt.

"Yeah," Felicity whispers with a little smile. "Yeah, it's okay."

Oliver smiles softly, and the look he gives her makes the bed suddenly very, very warm.

He settles in, pillowing his head on her chest, pressing one arm underneath her back, the other draping over her thighs, his hand finding her waist. Her hands move of their own volition, one raking her fingers through his hair as the other drops to his bare shoulder.

"Your heart's racing," he whispers, his voice soft, full of wonder.

He doesn't have to tell her, she can feel it, thrumming through her veins, and it only goes faster when he mentions it.

"Yeah, well, it's not every day the guy I've had a slight crush on uses me as a pillow," she replies and her eyes widen when she realizes what she just said.

He chuckles, his hand sliding up waist slightly, his fingers drifting over her ribs, and her heart beats *faster*.

"Only a slight crush?" he asks, and she can hear the smile in his words.

"Oh yeah," she says lightly, running her fingers through his hair again. "Just a little one."

He falls silent, and after a moment, Felicity takes a deep breath. She watches his head rise with it and fall back down, the intimacy of it striking her - it's *perfect*, in a way she can't even describe.

Oliver's fingers lightly drift over her shirt, brushing across her skin, and it slowly becomes soothing instead of '*oh wow, Oliver is really doing this.'*

As the minutes pass, they slowly grow more comfortable.

Felicity shifts, snuggling a little closer to him, her eyes growing heavy.

She's falling asleep, letting it pull her under, when she feels him press a soft kiss over her heart with a whispered, "Thank you."

Chapter 12

It makes absolutely no logical sense that you can feel someone looking at you. It violates all manner of scientific theory and that's the sort of thing that *bothers* Felicity. It sounds more magical than anything based in reality and yet…. and yet she wakes up entirely because she can feel someone staring at her.

Felicity slowly blinks herself awake, the chilling images from her dream fading. The world blurs for a second before righting itself. Her eyes instantly find the tiny someone who is doing the staring.

Ellie is nearly eye-level with her and scarcely a foot away, staring with huge, tear-crested eyes, a hesitant look on her face.

Alarm slices through Felicity, and in the next second she's wide awake.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asks, her voice rough with sleep. She moves to sit up before realizing Oliver is still draped across her, weighing her down. Her movement wakes him and he instantly tenses behind her, his grip on her tightening before he realizes where he is. But before Felicity can do anything, Ellie's face suddenly crumples in a mess of tears - like Felicity's acknowledgement that something is bothering her has given permission for the waterworks to start in earnest - and *wow*, she has no idea how to cope with this. "Ellie, what's wrong?"

"I had scary dreams," Ellie replies in a tiny voice.

The distraught look on her face is absolutely heartbreaking.

"Oh…" Felicity whispers.

Of course she'd had nightmares. She'd been through so much in the last day, had her life threatened multiple times… It's enough to send anyone into a fit of violently horrifying dreams, but for a toddler? It had to have been a near certainty.

A wave of guilt and regret hits her. She should have expected this, should have made sure that when Ellie woke it was in her cocoon where she feels safe and protected. She'd been so worried about what she'd do when she was awake, she didn't stop to think about what might happen when she was sleeping.

"Come here, baby," Oliver says, sleep making his voice husky and delicious in a way that now is so not the time for. He holds his hand out in invitation to Ellie, who immediately takes it, diving into the bed with them.

"I wanna go home," Ellie cries, her little body shaking with tears. She curls into Felicity's side, pressing her wet face into Felicity's chest as Oliver wraps his arm around her. "I don't want the bad men to find me."

Felicity can taste her fear, feel it in her bones, and the same irresistible need to hold her close and never let her go fills her.

Tears burn Felicity's eyes as she cuddles her daughter closer.

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Oliver promises her, his voice strong, far more alert than Felicity's. He pulls both of them in closer, cocooning them, settling his large hand against her tiny back in comfort. He ducks his head, his forehead brushing Felicity's as he presses a firm kiss to Ellie's head. "We won't let it. We'll do anything to keep you safe. We send you back in time to keep you safe, remember?"

Ellie nods with a thick sniffle, but Felicity's pretty sure she has no idea what she's agreeing to.

Until…

"Why do the bad men try to get me, daddy?" she asks, looking up him with a gut-wrenching innocence that thoroughly hollows Felicity out, and leaves her feeling like she could double over from the emotional pain alone.

Oliver opens his mouth to respond, but he's got nothing, he doesn't know how to reply. Ellie stares at him, waiting, and he visibly sags under the weight of guilt he so frequently bears like an albatross hung around his neck. She can feel him retreating into himself, letting his better sense be suffocated by crippling amounts of self-recrimination.

But Ellie's not done talking.

"Big Sara says it's 'cause I grow up good an' Zoom doesn't like that, so he keeps coming back to find me," Ellie whimpers, looking for answers they don't have, and that sends her own brand of guilt searing through Felicity. "Is that why the bad man with one eye wants to hurt me too?"

Felicity's eyes meet Oliver's, both of them asking questions they know they can't resolve at the moment. Oliver's pensive look cuts through his guilt at least - Ellie's deflected some of it with the tiny bits of knowledge about the future that she unwittingly lets them in on.

"No, Ellie," Felicity finally says, realizing one of them has to say *something* and it's not going to be Oliver. She looks at Ellie, whose eyes shift over to her. Felicity cuddles her closer, running a hand over her tangled hair. "Slade wanted to hurt your daddy and he knew your daddy would be scared if he tried to hurt you. He was very mean, but he's gone now. Lyla locked him up in prison. He can't get you anymore."

"He can't get away?" Ellie asks softly, looking like she wants to believe her mother, but she's hesitant to.

"From Lyla?" Felicity tweaks Ellie's nose with forced lightness that she desperately hopes is contagious. "Have you *met* Lyla?"

"But…" Ellie starts, her brow furrowing as she tries to make sense of things. "He can't go to different times like Zoom and Uncle Barry and Big Sara?"

"What?" Oliver asks abruptly, sitting up, but he's too wrapped around both of them to get far. Instead he props himself up on his elbow as Felicity frowns, trying to follow what Ellie's saying. Big Sara, as in Sara Lance?

"He's stuck now?" Ellie asks, her eyes switching between them. "Right?"

"Yeah, sweetie," Felicity confirms without thinking, just needing to see that line of worry that's so like Oliver's disappear from between her daughter's brows. She's ninety-nine percent sure Slade can't actually travel through time - and if someone'd told her she'd be thinking about time travel so cavalierly a few days ago, she'd have laughed. "He's stuck now. He can't get out."

Ellie's eyes automatically fly to Oliver's waiting for the same confirmation from him. When none comes, her face crumples slightly, making Felicity look at him. He's frowning, lost in thought - trying to make sense of what Ellie's saying. Felicity nudges him with her knee and his eyes fly to hers.

"He can't get out," she repeats for emphasis, and when the words register, Oliver's face softens.

"No," he confirms. He smiles at Ellie. "He can't get out, baby. Not ever."

His reassurance helps. A little.

"So," Felicity says, drawing Ellie's eyes back to her. "You know… Big Sara?"

"'Course," Ellie replies, looking confused. "She visits sometimes with her friends when bad things happen. She looks funny when she comes without the big owie on her cheek." She sniffles. "I like Big Sara, but I don't like when she comes 'cause it's always badness."

That little tidbit illuminates absolutely nothing for Felicity. She's pretty sure it doesn't for Oliver either. Felicity wants to ask more, but she bites her tongue. It's incredibly frustrating, sneaking tidbits here and there that lack any foundation, but it's also probably a good thing. Knowing too much about the future is a dangerous thing and they've already figured out way more than is advisable.

"When can we go home?" Ellie asks again, an anxiety Felicity's never heard in her voice lining every syllable as she circles back to her original question. "I miss my room. And I want my toys." When neither of them answer, her voice starts louder. She tugs on her sleeves as she says, "I don't wanna be here anymore. I miss talking to the baby in momma's tummy and I wanna play with Sara… I wanna watch Rascal the Raccoon!"

She's working herself into a frenzy. Even someone as inexperienced with kids as Felicity can see *that* mounting.

"Uh," Felicity starts, scrambling to do something as tears flood Ellie's eyes again, her lower lip starting to tremble. She can't go home, she can't go to her room or talk to a baby that isn't in Felicity's stomach yet. Her mind blanks as Ellie becomes more agitated, more frantic, searching for something *normal*, a normal that they really can't give her.

"Okay, hey, it's okay, sweetie," Oliver whispers, rubbing his hand soothingly down her side, but it has almost the opposite effect.

"I wanna watch Rascal, daddy!" Ellie repeats.

"I know, sweetie, but it's not on here, remember? Remember we talked about that earlier?" That is so not the right answer as Ellie freezes, staring at Oliver with wide, wet eyes that tell both of them she's about

to lose it. "Hey, it's okay, it's okay… we'll find something else, okay?"

At that, Felicity's mind spins right into place - there is literally only one of Ellie's points she can *maybe* address, and damned if she isn't going to try.

"Oliver, hold her," Felicity orders as she picks up the sobbing mess of toddler and turns her to him.

If her heart pounds furiously and her skin tingles at the sight of him immediately pulling Ellie to his chest and making soothing noises into her hair as her rocks her slightly… well, now isn't really the time to think about that.

"What are you doing?" he asks, sitting up, holding Ellie effortlessly in his arms as Felicity slides off the bed, grabbing her tablet.

"I have no idea if Rascal the Raccoon exists yet or not, but I'm sure as hell going to find out," she announces, swiping at the tablet with determination.

"But…" Ellie says, sniffling, visibly calming, almost as if the new purpose in the air calms her. She looks at Felicity, all red-faced with teary cheeks and a runny nose that is actually *super* gross. "Daddy said you didn't have Rascal?"

Oliver takes her messy face in stride though, grabbing a tissue from the nightstand, cleaning her up as Felicity gives her a smile.

"I'm trying to find him, baby," Felicity assures her, looking back at her tablet. "You don't like… I dunno… Winnie the Pooh? He's a pretty great animal, right? Even if he is friends with a kangaroo and I find that totally shady."

"*Felicity*," Oliver huffs with a laugh, shaking his head at her.

"He's not Rascal," Ellie points out with tremendous emphasis. "Rascal is my favoritest *ever*."

"Right," Felicity nods, her resolve doubling.

And… okay, Rascal-the-goddamned-Raccoon *isn't* on television yet, she finds out, but it *is* being produced and frankly there's a whole lot more questionable things she's done with her computer skills than a little television piracy, even if it *is* directly from the studio's servers.

Whatever.

"It won't be a new one, but I'll have Rascal loaded up for you in a few minutes, okay?" Felicity asks Ellie.

"*Really*?" Ellie asks with heart-breaking amounts of hope shining in her eyes. And *seriously*, her child is maybe a little too invested in a tv show. "You promise?"

"Pinky swear," Felicity nods. She glances back at her tablet, noting its progress. Or rather, lack of. It's running a bit slower than she'd have expected.

"What is it?" Oliver asks, reading her like a book. She hadn't even realized her brow was furrowing until he spoke. Felicity shakes her head, already flipping through a few screens to find the lag.

"Your wifi is horrible, Oliver," she tells him. "Honestly, it's like…"

She fades off mid-sentence, paling a little as she stares down at the tablet, her finger stilling over the wifi connection information. It's right there, clear as day.

"It's like what, Felicity?" he asks.

"It's like the universe is telling us to get a little sunshine," she covers with a tight smile. She's always been better at cover stories than him. "Ellie, why don't we take a walk outside while your show loads, okay?"

Oliver doesn't move, his eyes filling with questions. And *yeah*, they are definitely questions she needs to answer, but not now. Not here. That would be a terrible idea and it's just become incredibly clear how bad that would be.

"Fresh air seems like a good idea, right? It's all… clean, and… airy," she adds. The look on Oliver's face does nothing at all to destroy the notion that she sounds crazy. Well, she kinda feels crazy right now, it makes sense that she *sounds* kinda crazy too. But it's warranted.

Very, very warranted.

"Are you okay, momma?" Ellie asks.

Great. Even the three-year-old thinks she's acting weird.

A humorless laugh is the only thing she can produce before Oliver

covers for her.

"She's fine, Ellie-bug," he says. He looks down at her. "Can you find your shoes? There's a tree fort in the yard I built for your Aunt Thea when she was just a little older than you. Have you ever seen it?"

"No!" Ellie says, perking up immensely. "Aunt Thea told me about it. She said it was very fun but that it got all burned up in the fire. I never got to see it."

Fire?

God, what the hell kind of future do they have?

Concern knits Oliver's brow as he tries to make sense of that little tidbit, and Felicity pushes her own curiosity away - she's *way* more concerned with the here and now than some possible eventual fire at a likely-abandoned tree fort.

"Shoes," Felicity agrees. Her mind jumps to what else they need. "Shoes are good. And a coat. Ellie needs a warm coat. Is that bag of stuff Digg brought still in the bathroom? Did he bring one? We need one."

"Felicity, it's *May*," Oliver reminds her, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Ellie still in his arms. "It's not exactly cold out."

"Kids need coats to play outside, Oliver," Felicity says firmly without thinking, and a second later, the reality that she sounds painfully like her own mother hits her. Donna Smoak might have let her outside in a short skirt but *damned* if she was going to let her out without a coat. "It's like a mom rule, okay? If I let her outside without a coat, she's going to catch a cold and then future me is going to be super mad at current me and *wow*, will that be confusing, and I'd much prefer to avoid all of that, okay?"

She's possibly slightly hysterical.

"Okay," Oliver agrees, obviously entirely to placate her as he sets Ellie down to go grab her shoes from the bathroom. "I think Digg brought a sweater. She can wear that, okay? Ellie, grab the sweater from the bag in there, okay?"

"'Kay," Ellie says, disappearing into the bathroom. The rustle of the bag and clothes quickly follows.

"Did he like knock over a Gymboree or something?" Felicity wonders aloud, cradling her tablet close to her chest as she looks for her own shoes. "'Cause, let me tell you, the mental image of him shopping for a three year old girl's wardrobe is a thing that's gonna stick with me."

"Hey!" Ellie says, wandering back into the room proudly wearing a too-large pink cardigan covered in unicorns. "Sara had one just like this! I *love* it! It's my very favorite because the big unicorn has *two* horns on accident and that makes it extra special."

She's sticking out her belly and chest proudly as she looks down at the double-horned unicorn. It's obviously a production error, one of those things that happens now and then when you've got a huge pile of mass produced clothing and too few people working quality control. But that means…

Felicity's eyes widen and her mouth opens a little as pieces start to shift into place in her head.

"It's the same sweater," she realizes. "Oliver… I don't think Digg knocked over a Gymboree. I think he already *had* this."

"Why would…?" Oliver starts as he tugs on a t-shirt before his brain catches up with what Felicity's suggesting. "You think…?"

"I think Lyla's already pregnant," Felicity confirms. "I think he already had this because he's already buying the baby things. Why he'd buy this in a toddler size I have no idea, John doesn't exactly strike me as the kind of guy to buy things from the cheap pile, but…"

"Aunt Lyla's having a baby?" Ellie asks, her eyes brightening to the point that it's almost unbelievable she was a sobbing mess five minutes ago.

Kids.

"Uh… I'm not sure, sweetie," Felicity says, kneeling down to button up Ellie's cardigan. "But, well…" She has no idea what to say. It's not like Ellie's exactly *un*aware of what's going on. So maybe… Felicity holds Ellie's hips still as she smiles at her. "Remember how you went back in time?"

Ellie nods, which is encouraging.

"Sara's not born yet. Maybe she's in Aunt Lyla's belly right now, and I think maybe that *is* her sweater. Pretty cool you get to wear it first,

huh? When you go… when you… go back, you can tell her."

Oh, that'd been harder to say than she'd considered before opening her mouth.

Felicity pauses, staring at Ellie's guileless face. She hadn't even *thought* about what would happen when Ellie goes back, because of course she has to go back… the notion hurts way, way, way more than she's willing to think about at the moment.

Oliver's hand lands on her shoulder, squeezing slightly. She glances at him and the look on his face - both pained and hopeful - proves it wasn't easy to *hear* either.

"Outside," Felicity reiterates, standing back up. Ellie grabs her hand and Felicity holds onto her tightly. "Let's go see about a tree fort."

Barely a day has passed since this all began, so it really *should* surprise her when Oliver's hand slides from her shoulder down to the small of her back, but it doesn't. There's a closeness that, while new, also feels intensely honest.

Felicity's had her fair share of relationships before, she knows what that buzz of a young relationship feels like surging through her skin, but this isn't that. Or, at least it's not *only* that. It's respect and friendship. It's blinding amounts of attraction and a promise that whispers of forever. And while that's still slightly terrifying, it's terrifying in the best way possible.

So no, his hand on the small of her back isn't surprising, and she's pretty sure the way she tucks under his arm and leans into his impressive frame doesn't surprise him either. It doesn't hurt anything that his proximity - the way he practically surrounds her and stays within arm's reach of Ellie - makes her feel safe, either. It's something she could definitely use about now.

Ellie wasn't the only one who'd had nightmares.

They make their way downstairs and the second they reach the double door that leads to the back patio, Oliver starts, "Felicity, what-"

"How about that tree fort!" she cuts him off. "That's gotta be pretty far back on the property, right? Like… *not near the house*?"

"Yeah," he replies warily, his hand edging around her side so he's holding her a little close, like he's worried. Which is probably not

entirely unfounded.

"Well… 'lay on MacDuff,'" she instructs making a broad gesture that's met with a blank stare. "I know most people say '*lead* on MacDuff,' but that's not actually the line."

"Felicity, I have no idea what you're talking about," he tells her, even as he starts leading the way across the lawn, away from the house.

"Shakespeare?" Felicity asks as they head towards a small bank of trees near a fenced-off and incredibly-well-tended garden.

"… was *not* a thing I bothered reading in school, remember?" he replies with a short laugh.

"Why not?" Ellie asks curiously from Felicity's side, her little fingers still intertwined loosely with her mother's. "Didn't your teacher tell you to? Homework's important, daddy."

He grins, giving Ellie an appreciative glance before whispering to Felicity, "I'm glad she inherited that mindset from you," She smiles in reply, delight at the very notion of those words warming her veins. "Ellie, honey, you're right. I wasn't a very good student. I'm sure you'll be better than me."

"I am going to read all of the books one day," she replies with a kind of confidence only found in small children for whom possibility is endless. "I already know lots of letters."

"That's a really good goal, Ellie-bug. Lofty, but good," he tells her as they stop at the base of a tree, glancing up. Felicity follows his gaze - the tree's already in full bloom, and it's very nearly obscuring the treehouse, which… is *impressive*.

Oliver's hand falls from Felicity's side as he rounds to face Ellie. He crouches in front of her and points up at the branches of the tree.

"Look."

"*Whoa*," Ellie says, her eyes going huge as she takes in the sight in front of her with total delight. "*Daddy*, it's like a *fairy castle*!"

Felicity's not ashamed to say her breath catches a little bit as she takes it in herself. This is not a tree fort made of spare wooden planks and rusted nails. Not that she should have expected that for Thea Queen, really. But, surprisingly, neither is it something manufactured by an

actual construction crew - not a thing Felicity would have put past the Queens for their little girl's playhouse.

Years have weathered its exterior a bit, but the treehouse is obviously handmade with tremendous care. It's intricate - she's pretty sure it has at least two distinct rooms - and sturdy-looking with glass pane windows and a shingled roof. It's mostly not painted, but it is stained. The wood looks rich, like the fairy castle Ellie proclaimed it, its windows edged in pink trim and curls of ivy carved out of the sides, left a weathered green.

"You *built* this?" Felicity asks, looking back at Oliver.

"Tommy and I both did," he agrees, ducking his head bashfully. "We took woodshop in the ninth grade. Thea was four and our goals were always lofty."

"You actually carved all of that yourself?" she asks again, blinking at him.

"Along with Tommy," he smiles, looking a little wistful at the memory. "It was Thea's fifth birthday present. My dad did hire an architect and we had help with the windows, but other than that… all us. It actually kept us out of a whole lot of trouble our freshman year of high school." He made a face. "Sophomore year was another story…"

"Wow," Felicity says in amazement. "That's just…"

"What?" he asks, looking a little apprehensive of her reaction as he stands back up and puts his hands in his pockets.

"Every time I think you can't impress me more, you prove me wrong," she tells him.

The smile he responds with isn't blindingly wide, but it definitely reaches his eyes. The quiet pleasure of her approval that plays across his face is at least as meaningful as any grin he's ever offered up.

"Can I play up there, daddy? Can I, *please*?" Ellie begs, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Sure," he tells her, looking down at her hopeful little face. "I wouldn't show you a fairy castle and then tell you that you *couldn't* go in it, would I? You might want to open the windows to air it out a bit, though. No one's been up there in a long time."

"Except the fairies!" Ellie declares, scrambling for the ladder carved into the trunk of the tree and scaling it with a speed that sends Felicity's heart practically surging out of her chest.

"Ellie, *be careful*," Felicity admonishes, positioning herself at the base of the trunk, fully prepared to attempt to catch the little girl should she fall.

But she doesn't. Ellie, it seems, has her father's grace as she scurries up the tree. Well… thank goodness for *that* - if she's going to have his activity level, she should definitely have his sure-footedness too.

The chuckle to her side tells her she *probably* said that bit aloud. But it's true, and for once she's not embarrassed about it. This new… *thing* with Oliver, it's freeing in a way. She's said precisely what's on her mind more often than not anyhow, but now it doesn't feel so much like verbal floundering.

It feels… normal.

"So," Oliver says wrapping an arm around her waist and pressing a kiss to her hair as Ellie disappears into the fairy castle, closing the hatch behind her, "what was it you didn't want to tell me in front of Ellie?"

The reminder of why she'd practically shoved them out the door makes Felicity stiffen, and she looks up at him with apprehension. She hadn't *forgotten* about it, not by a longshot - a little hard when the evidence is still in her hands - but saying it out loud… it makes it real.

And right now, away from the house and the harsh dose of reality that comes with being in there, she doesn't want to go back to it. She wants to stay right here, where reality is treehouse castles and the fairies that live in them.

But, it's not like she has much of a choice.

Oliver's staring at her expectantly.

"Not in front of Ellie," she responds, biting her lip as she shakes her head. "In the *house*." He furrows his brow, not following. "Oliver… it's bugged. The entire house. That's why the wifi is slow. Someone's hijacking your signal to broadcast surveillance."

He freezes, face hardening as he lets the reality of those implications sink in. She sees the second it clicks into place.

"Slade…" he concludes, the same as she had. "He had access, thanks to my mom. He must have planted them that day, when she was showing him the art… He was *everywhere*, he…" His face visibly pales. "That's how he knew about Ellie, how he knew she was ours, that she was here. How he knew she was in the kitchen without me there."

Felicity's stomach churns at the reminder. She nods. "Yeah."

"*Daddy*!" Ellie shouts from above, having cracked open a window. "I found a *crown* in here! I think the Fairy Queen left it!"

"That's great, Ellie-bug!" he shouts back up to her, his voice sounding light, a total contradiction to the look shading his features.

"Oliver…" Felicity starts. "We have Slade captured now, but…"

"But he wasn't working alone," Oliver finishes, swallowing hard as he looks back at her, fear in his eyes. "Isabel knows we have a daughter."

They don't talk about it, about Isabel knowing about Ellie, or what might happen - no, what *will* happen. The second the reality of what Felicity had found hit him, he'd shoved it back down, not ready to give it the attention it sorely needed.

He couldn't ignore it forever, he knew that, but it could wait.

And it does.

The afternoon slips away as Ellie holds court in her fairy castle.

And it *is* Ellie's.

For all that it was Thea's before, it's clearly his daughter's domain now. She still swears she's not a princess - she says she's president because it's only fair that her fairy people get to choose their leader - but she *does* wear the crown, a dull metallic thing that's been up here at least a decade and has surely seen better days. But it rests atop her golden curls and she holds her head high like it's a priceless heirloom.

In some ways, maybe it is.

Squeezing into the little castle with her is no easy feat. Oliver can't

stand inside it and he barely fits through the hatch, but he wouldn't miss this opportunity for the world. She sits atop the carved wooden throne he lovingly crafted a lifetime ago, imaginary fairies surrounding her as she declares Oliver the captain of her knights. And he melts. Every interaction with his future daughter makes him love her just a little more.

He can't - he won't - tear himself away from her, not as long as he can help it, because he is, quite simply, completely entranced.

So is Felicity. She disappears at one point to grab them food, which they eat sprawled out on the floor of the treehouse. Oliver had offered to go, knowing the bloody mess that was still in the kitchen, but the instant Felicity had seen the look on his face at the thought of shoving himself through the hatch again, she'd chuckled, rolling her eyes with an amused, "*I'll go.*"

Luckily, the wifi signal reaches this far into the yard and she spends the time sifting through the data stream, analyzing the hijacked bandwidth, always setting it aside when Ellie directs anything towards her.

After lunch, their daughter proclaims to the pretend fairies that it is National Drink Apple Juice Day, and it's at that point that Oliver discovers very quickly that his daughter is capable of drinking an absurd amount of juice. Another thing he quickly discovers is that, juice or not, that much sugar is a *terrible* idea, something he learns when it leaves Ellie hyper as hell, speaking exactly as quick as her mother, using her hands for emphasis in a way that makes him think he's looking at a mini-Felicity.

It's as overwhelming as it is endearing.

When she starts spinning in circles, spreading pixie dust around to make her subjects fly, Oliver has to look away. He's dizzy just *watching* her. And drained. He can spend his evenings fighting assassins and jumping off of rooftops, but just seeing his three year old play make believe for hours on end is enough to make him feel worn out. The full night of sleep - well, full by his standards - and the mini-nap they'd snuck in were doing nothing to help.

How do they *do* this? How is it even possible for her to have this much energy?

"I told you to water down the juice," Felicity says with a smile, not looking up from her tablet.

"It's *fruit*," he argues half-heartedly, because her point proves itself as it spins in front of them.

Felicity pauses and looks up from the tablet to him, blinking with raised eyebrows before chancing a glance toward their daughter.

"*… and pixie dust for you and pixie dust for you and flyyyyyyyyyyy…"*

"That's what you're going with?" she asks, looking back at him again in well-earned disbelief. "Fruit does that?"

He flinches, grabbing the near-empty bottle of apple juice, studying the label. And *wow*, it's practically all sugar.

"Maybe we get the kind with no sugar added in the future?" Oliver asks, giving Felicity an apologetic smile.

Felicity grins as she nods. "Yeah, that's probably what we do." She shrugs. "Or, you know, just give her water."

Oliver gives her a tired look, one which only makes her smile wider.

"I like *juice*!" Ellie announces loudly, as if this is some sort of revelation.

"We got that, Ellie-bug," Oliver tells her.

"I want to have juice *all* the time. Fairy people, I decide you can all have juice always," she decrees, gesturing across the little room before she starts to spin again.

"Wow," Oliver murmurs as he watches her. Isn't there supposed to be some sort of crash that happens when you inhale that much sugar?

"Yeah," Felicity agrees. "Wow." After a second, she shakes her head, looking back at her tablet. "She's adorable, but I can't watch this." She taps on the screen as she talks. "It's making me nauseous just thinking about spinning like that. It's like watching you zipline through a window or scale a building like a spider monkey." Felicity looks up, and when she finds him already looking at her, Oliver doesn't miss the way her cheeks flush slightly. She points at him. "She gets this from you, you know. I prefer my feet on the ground and a total absence of vertigo. The Hitchcock kind, not the Count kind. Though, actually that would be true too."

Oliver can only smile. In wonder, in amusement… in joy.

Felicity returns it, the flush in her cheeks not going away before she turns back to her tablet.

While he finds it hard to take his attention off his daughter - he doesn't want to miss a thing, not a single damn thing - he finds it equally hard to keep his eyes off Felicity, for a very different reason. He openly stares at her, following her every movement as she works, from the flash of her nail polish to the way she bites her lip to the way her eyes dart over the screen.

There's something about her that draws him in, it always has, from that very first time he saw her talking to his photo in his father's office. But now, with years at his side and thousands of moments between them, it's *more*. He hadn't known it could be like this, that he could love someone in so many different ways… but he does. And now that he has it, he can't imagine ever settling for anything else. This is it. *She's* it, for him. He'd know that even without Ellie, he thinks, even if he probably wouldn't have been quite ready to admit it yet - he'd get there, he knows it in his gut.

But Ellie… she forces a lot of issues, in the best possible way.

As Ellie buzzes around the tight space, finding something new to talk about with each fairy she encounters, Felicity stretches her neck to the side in an obvious effort to work out a kink that's undoubtedly formed thanks to hours on end of staring down at the screen on her lap in the cramped confines of a treehouse.

Oliver barely thinks about what he's doing before lifting a hand to knead at the back of her neck.

Felicity groans as his fingers dig in. She stretches her neck forward to encourage him, her shoulders relaxing as she sighs - in delight - and *yeah*, those noises she makes are definitely encouraging.

His thumb finds a knot of muscle and presses firmly into it.

"Oh, *right* there," she breathes… and then she full on *moans*. The noise shoots straight through his body with an intensity that makes his breath catch. "*God*, you're good at that. How did I not know this? You should use your fingers on me all of the time. I could have been enjoying your hands for *years*."

The imagery her words bring to mind make him choke on his next breath. He's definitely not envisioning a neck rub now. No, his mind jumps straight back to what they'd started in his room that morning -

how she'd felt pressing against him, wrapping her legs around his waist, her hands in his hair, his fingers on her bare skin… Oliver's got entirely too vivid a memory and imagination and it quickly becomes more than a problem when she leans into him, giving him another moan.

It's obvious when her mind catches up with her words because she tenses and her eyes dart to his with more than a little hint of embarrassment. But he's not having that. Not *now*. They're past that, way past that, and he has zero interest in going back.

"Well," Oliver says, his voice rough. He trails his fingers gently down the ridges of her spine as he stares at her. He watches her pupils widen, not missing the way her lips part for a quick breath. "They're yours now, anytime you'd like."

He's really not talking about neck rubs - at least not entirely - and with the way she inhales sharply and runs her tongue along the ridges of her teeth as she holds his gaze, she clearly knows that.

The pink of her tongue draws his attention to her mouth.

He wants to taste it, to cover her brightly painted lips with his own. He wants to drink in her moans, bury his hands in her hair, pull her close. He wants it all so much his body practically vibrates with it, the air *hums*, and the entire world suddenly narrows, shifting focus until it's just them, just now…

"Did daddy tickle you?"

Oliver jolts at Ellie's voice, and it doesn't escape his attention that Felicity does too. Both of them were so lost in this thing between them that they'd completely forgotten Ellie was even there, sugar high or not. But Ellie… she's standing there, stock still with her head tilted to the side as she watches them with large curious blue eyes. It's the most he's seen her stand still in hours.

"What?" Oliver asks, swallowing hard because *wow*, does he need to regain some sense of control over his body at the moment.

"Not everybody likes tickling, daddy," Ellie tells him solemnly.

"I like *some* kinds of tickling," Felicity mumbles under her breath.

Oliver makes a strangled noise, somewhere between a laugh and a groan that gets stuck in his throat. She's not doing a damn thing to

help rein in his body's reaction to her. He shifts awkwardly in an attempt to keep *some* of his dignity intact in front of his three-year-old daughter and avoid a rather ill-timed discussion on anatomy.

"I'll keep that in mind," Oliver says, and it's his turn to make Felicity choke out a snort.

"Is gramma back yet?" Ellie asks.

Well… that comment sure helps matters. *Thank you, Ellie.* He glances at his watch - it's later than he'd thought.

"Maybe. If she's not home yet, she should be back any minute," Oliver says. He glances at Felicity. "Did you finish your, uh… project?"

"Sort of," she replies. "I got enough done for now, anyhow." She glances back down at her tablet, which had turned off - how long had he been touching her? "There's no audio, but I know what's being watched."

"Good," he says. He glances at the screen, his stomach sinking when he sees the multiple camera feeds. They're *everywhere*. "We need to consider if it's a better idea to use the cameras to mislead her or if we're better off just getting rid of them. I want to talk to Digg and Sara before we make any decisions there."

"And your mom," Felicity points out.

Oliver hesitates at that before tilting his head in reluctant concurrence.

"And my mom," he agrees. It's a foreign idea, including her in Arrow-related problems. And, truth be told, he's not really at ease with the notion. But Felicity's right. There's no way to exclude her at this point, especially since it is her home that's currently being watched.

After a moment of quiet, Ellie asks, "Is Raisa gonna be okay? And Uncle Diggle?"

Hesitance is etched in her every feature, her little brow wrinkled in concern, looking way too familiar for his tastes as she waits for an answer. How had he not thought to talk with her about this before?

"Digg's fine, sweetie," Felicity says, setting the tablet aside to pull Ellie onto her lap. "And Raisa just needed to be checked out by a doctor and get a cast for her arm."

"Can I draw a picture on it?" Ellie responds, her eyes bright at the prospect.

"I'm sure she'd love that," Felicity says.

"I could draw flowers! Raisa likes flowers, yellow ones."

"She… does," Oliver acknowledges, memories surfacing of daffodils on the table in the breakfast nook throughout his childhood. "Do you spend a lot of time with Raisa?"

"Sometimes," Ellie shrugs. "When you and momma and Uncle Digg and Uncle Roy are all busy with missions."

The word mission coming off her lips sends him back to the day before, when he'd just found out that Felicity had run into his mother, when he'd rushed over, not sure what he was going to walk into, but finding he didn't care as long as he made sure his family was okay.

"*You always kiss us when you get back from a mission."*

Oliver glances at Felicity, and he wonders if she's remembering the same thing. When she meets his eyes, he thinks she is.

"I'm glad," Oliver says. He looks at Ellie again, reaching out to tug on one of her wavy curls. "Raisa looked after me when I was growing up, you know."

"I *know* that, daddy," Ellie says, rolling her eyes. "You say it all the time, because it makes Raisa smile really big. Can I pick her a flower too? Gramma has lots out back. Can I? For Raisa?"

If it were anyone else asking, he knows for a fact that the answer would be a resounding *no*. But Oliver's pretty sure that Ellie could do absolutely anything and his mother would still smile on approvingly. As someone who got away with entirely too much growing up, he's well aware he's going to have to watch that.

But not when it comes to picking flowers for Raisa.

"I think that's a great idea," Oliver agrees.

"I will pick her the *very best flower ever*," Ellie announces, buzzing with excitement. "And then I'll draw it on her cast *too*. It'll make her so happy she won't even feel her owie anymore!"

"That would be some flower," Felicity says slightly louder than she'd

probably intended. Ellie's brow furrows at her tone, looking up at her mother in slightly distraught concern. Oliver shoots Felicity a look and she instantly plasters a too large smile on her face as she adds, "Which is a thing we will *definitely* find!"

Ellie brightens immediately at that while Oliver just shakes his head in Felicity's direction.

"We need to find one the fairies sprinkled with pixie dust, they'll help us find the best one!" Ellie says, scrambling out of Felicity's lap towards the hatch. "Come on, daddy!"

Oliver grabs her around the waist before she gets too far, tugging her back. "How about you let me go down first. Just to be on the safe side."

"I'm a very good climber, daddy," she tells him. "Uncle Roy says I am a monkey, even."

"Like father, like daughter," Felicity whispers and he shoots her a small smile.

"I know you are, Ellie-bug," he says, remembering the way she'd climbed up the tree like it was nothing. They're eye-level by necessity, thanks to the roof he's really wishing he'd made taller, but it works well now because Ellie can see the earnest look in his eyes. "But… call it a dad thing, okay? It'll just make me feel better."

It's a little scary how mind-numbingly fast he's become attached to that title, how *right* it feels, the bond that's freshly forged but solid with this little girl standing in front of him.

"Okay," she relents. "If it'll make you feel better. I don't want you to be sad."

"I'm not sad, honey, just… a little worried," he tells her. "It's a very long way down, I don't want you to break anything."

"I don't fall," Ellie tells him matter-of-factly. "I didn't even fall when the tree broke, when Sara fell and she hurt her ankle. Remember, you told me you were very proud of me for holding onto the tree branch, for being such a good climber."

Oliver closes his eyes at the *imagined* fear of hearing a tree branch break, of hearing someone's scream of pain, and knowing his daughter was somewhere he couldn't help her… he can't imagine the *actual*

fear.

Yeah, he's definitely going down first.

Ellie pats his arm. "But you go first so you won't worry so much."

She says it so earnestly Oliver can't help but chuckle.

"Thank you," he tells her, kissing her on the forehead.

From the corner of his eye he can see Felicity watching them, blatant affection on her face. It's a look he's quickly becoming familiar with because it's the same one on his face when he watches her with Ellie - he knows he loves them on their own, but together? It's so, so much better.

Their eyes meet for only a moment over Ellie's head, but it's enough to leave him feeling the strength of this thing between them.

It hits him then: this is the last woman he'll ever love. He knows it with a bone-deep certainty he's never felt in his life. Once upon a time, that notion would have sent him running. Not now. Not with her. With her, he wants to hold on and never let go.

"See you on solid ground," Felicity says, reminding him that he's meant to be leading them out of the clubhouse, and with a small grin, he does.

The second his feet are on the ground, Ellie's quick to follow, and true to her word, she doesn't slip. She's actually absurdly sure-footed and incredibly fast, scurrying down the tree more like a squirrel than a monkey, barely giving him a chance to snatch her off the tree before she's on the ground, heading towards the garden.

Felicity, on the other hand, misses a rung and ends up tumbling with a little shriek. For the split second she's in the air, Oliver swears he sees her bracing herself, preparing to land on the ground with a solid thud that would probably bruise the hell out of her ass, but he doesn't let it happen.

He'd be lying if he said he didn't fully enjoy every second of her landing safely in his waiting arms.

"You caught me," Felicity gasps. Her glasses are off-center, her lips parted in surprise. "You actually caught me."

Oliver chuckles, setting her on her feet but not letting her go - her disbelief might have been slightly more insulting if it weren't so incredibly endearing.

"I will always catch you, Felicity," he replies. He fixes her glasses, brushing stray strands of hair off her cheek. He lets his hand linger. "Always."

"You know," she whispers, a little breathless, holding his gaze, "I think you might."

Oliver smiles, his thumb brushing over her cheek. Felicity's throat moves as she swallows, her eyes darting down to his lips for a split second. He doesn't have to think about it, or wonder if he should or shouldn't, not anymore. Oliver cups her cheek, tilting her face up towards his as he leans in.

His lips brush against hers, but he doesn't go all the way, leaving that…

Felicity closes the distance, kissing him with everything she has, and he returns it, sliding his arm around her waist, his hand slipping into her hair as she grips his shirt, pulling him closer.

He still can't wrap his mind around how much has happened, how much still needs to happen, but this, in this moment, none of it matters - as long as she's there, he'll be okay; *they'll* be okay. He knows it, just as certainly as he knows that she's it, she's the one.

"I found the flower, momma!" Ellie shrieks in the distance, pulling them apart.

"Flower duty," Felicity whispers, making Oliver grin. She kisses him once, twice… and a few more times before pulling back. "Let's go."

"Let's go," Oliver agrees.

They turn to the garden, Oliver slipping his arm around her shoulders as she wraps her arm around his waist, both of them finding Ellie's blonde head as she bounces through the foliage… just in time to see Moira Queen stepping out of the house, raising her hand in greeting.

Chapter 13

"We need to talk."

They say it at the same time, the instant Moira reaches him where he stands at the entrance to her coveted garden.

When his mother had seen he and Felicity weren't going to meet her at the house, she'd cocked her head in question before stepping out to join them. It was about then that Ellie had popped out of the garden, talking rapidly about a purple flower that she just had to show Felicity, and at that, she'd dragged her mother down the floral pathway. Felicity had chanced a glance back at him, and he must have been smiling because her face split into a grin before Ellie abruptly stopped, yanking Felicity down to her level. Oliver had watched them, for a split second, as Ellie had pointed at the flower. Felicity had gently grabbed her hand, showing Ellie how to touch the flowers without hurting them, leading to a picturesque moment of mother and daughter gently handling the flowers, alternating between rubbing petals between their fingers and looking up which was which.

The sound of Moira's soft tread in the grass had pulled him back to the harsh reality that he'd managed to escape again for a few hours in the treehouse.

"Is something wrong?" Moira asks, her eyes finding Ellie and Felicity. She barely reacts to them actually being in there - Oliver remembers quite well the last time he and Thea had snuck into the garden, their mother had not approved in the least. "Is it Ellie?"

"No," Oliver replies, shaking his head. "She's fine. Well, as fine as she can be considering the morning she had. We took a little nap and she…" He pauses, remembering his daughter's quiet, '*I had scary dreams.*' Her voice had been so tiny, so scared, and his only desire had been to scoop her up and never let her go, especially when she started asking him about the bad men trying to get her. His chest tightens all over again, but he forces himself to take a breath. "She had some nightmares."

"Oh, the poor thing," Moira sighs, shaking her head. Her hair is pulled back in a neat ponytail, her makeup once more impeccable and her clothes clean and straight. The white bandage hiding the large gash on her forehead almost looks like it belongs there with how well his mother carries herself. Her eyes meet his again. "If they're anything

like when you and Thea had nightmares…"

He knows if he had the ability to erase those nightmares from Ellie's mind, he would in a heartbeat, and he reads the same steadfastness in his mother's voice.

Like she knows what he's thinking, a serene smile crosses her lips and she clasps his arm in understanding.

His eyes find the bandage again. "Are you okay? Is Raisa?"

"I'm alright and she's fine, just a broken wrist. She does have a nasty bump on the back of her head. The doctors recommended she stay overnight for observation. I figured that was a wonderful idea for many reasons, namely getting that kitchen cleaned up."

"Good," Oliver says with a nod. "I'm glad."

"So, if it's not Ellie that we need to talk about," Moira says, "what is it?"

The idea of talking to his mother about Arrow business still makes his skin itch. The fact that she knows, that she has known for quite some time, doesn't change the fact that she's his mother, and that she herself has been at the receiving end of Arrow business on more than one occasion. Is that why he's hesitating, why he doesn't want to tell her what's going on? Or is it because he still wants to protect her?

Either way, he knows he can't keep this particular thing from her - it's *her* house that's bugged.

"It's Isabel," Oliver says.

Moira's face instantly shutters as she draws her shoulders back. Her eyes fly to where Ellie and Felicity are still crouched before looking back at him.

"What about her?" she asks crisply, all traces of her earlier lightness completely absent.

"She was working with Slade," he says, and a dark frown mars his mother's face. "She was part of his plan to take everything away from me, the company part at least."

"Yes, well," her mother says, nodding her head slightly as she purses her lips. "That's not surprising in the least, she's always been a… she's

always been conniving." His eyebrows go up when she stops herself. "Well, that's beside the point. With Mr. Wilson out of commission, I imagine she's lost a lot of the support he was giving her. Which might be very helpful actually."

Oliver furrows his brow. "Helpful with what?"

"I got a call from Ned Foster," Moira says, and for the first time Oliver notices the folded up paper in her hand. "While I was at the hospital."

His stomach sinks when he realizes what she's holding. He'd completely forgotten.

"The papers for the trust."

"Yes," Moira replies. "It'd slipped my mind as well, in all the…" She waves at Ellie, who now has a handful of picked flowers. Instead of making her cringe, it only makes her face soften. "Understandably, of course. Still." She looks back at Oliver. "It doesn't change that we have a limited window to secure what little assets we still have if we're going to get the company back. And considering what you just told me about Ms. Rochev, I'd say it's more important now than ever to make sure we don't let her completely wipe us out, which she's already well on her way towards doing. Ned told me she's already taking the next steps towards taking the house, as well as the numerous properties we still hold in the city. Including Verdant."

He already knows where she's going with this.

"Thea."

"Thea," Moira concurs. "I know I asked you to talk with her, but since you are more than a little preoccupied at the moment…" Oliver closes his eyes - that's a slight understatement. "I stopped by Ned's office for another copy of the papers and I went to the club."

His eyes fly open at that. "And?"

Moira's watching Ellie and Felicity again. "And she wouldn't even see me." Her voice is remote, like she's talking about tax returns and not the fact that her daughter is freezing her out. It doesn't matter that he can't hear it, he can see it in her eyes, and he knows that it's cutting her deeply. Moira presses her lips together. "She had one of her employees kindly tell me to leave."

Oliver doesn't know what to say. He's not surprised in the least,

because he'd been right there himself just a few days ago. Ellie not only changed what's happening between him and Felicity, but also between him and his mother. But just because her appearance made some of the issues that'd existed between them seem incredibly benign, it doesn't change that they were there in the first place.

"Which is why I need you to go to Verdant and get her to sign these papers."

"What?" His eyes go out to the garden. "I can't go."

"I understand what I'm asking, Oliver," Moira says, turning to him. "But we're running out of time."

"I'm not leaving my daughter here," Oliver replies, shaking his head. Like *hell* he's leaving either Felicity or Ellie there without him - Slade may have been the biggest threat, but he definitely isn't the only one. "Especially not with…"

She can't possibly appreciate the gravity of what she's asking.

"Not with what?" Moira asks, frowning.

Oliver sighs. "Isabel working with Slade wasn't the only thing I wanted to tell you. When Slade was over here, before… everything that happened, he planted cameras all over the house."

Moira's face shutters again, her eyes narrowing. "Excuse me?"

"When you had Thea give him a tour of the art in the house, he used that to plant cameras everywhere."

"How…?"

"Felicity discovered they're using our wifi signal to broadcast the surveillance. He's been watching the house ever since that day."

Moira lets out a tiny, shaky breath, clenching her jaw in a disbelief that instantly morphs into a resolved anger that hardens the lines of her body. He can see the wheels turning in her head as she processes this, racing through the different possibilities and ways to handle it.

"That's how Slade knew," she says. She glances back into the garden. "About Ellie, about where we were in the house, about… everything."

"Yeah."

"And Isabel," Moira continues, nodding. "She knows about Ellie."

"Which is why I'm not leaving her here," Oliver says. "From what we can tell, there aren't cameras in most of the bedrooms, they're mostly in the main areas of the house. We'll handle Isabel, but I don't want to lose the little ground we still have."

"Using the cameras to your advantage," Moira fills in, nodding, and it's almost a little chilling how quickly she's agreeing to the plan, like she'd already considered it herself. "Although what advantage is the question."

"I'm still putting that part together," Oliver admits. "But it's not just the company I'm worried about, it's whatever else Slade had planned. It isn't like him to have one course of action, I wouldn't be surprised if he had thirty contingency plans waiting in the wings, or if the only reason he was comfortable attacking this morning was because he already had something else in the works."

"Then let's handle things one at a time," Moira suggests. She hands him the papers and Oliver fights the urge to roll his eyes. "Go to Verdant, get Thea to sign these papers, at least give us a way to fight back on the company front."

"Mom, I really don't *care*…"

"You *will*, Oliver," Moira interrupts. "And I'm not asking you to handle all of this, just get Thea to sign the papers so we can secure what assets we do have left, and then leave the rest to me. I'll handle Isabel when it comes to Queen Consolidated, you handle her where Mr. Wilson is concerned."

Oliver frowns, not liking the ominous feel behind her words. "What are you going to do? The board voted me out as CEO, and she's been systematically destroying the holdings we did have in the company."

"Don't worry about it," Moira says, squeezing his arm. "Maybe you can take Ellie and Felicity with you."

Oliver closes his eyes, shaking his head, not even willing to entertain that idea because the last thing they need to be doing is parading Ellie around town, and that doesn't even touch on what would happen when Thea saw Ellie.

The thought makes his lungs feel like they're full of concrete.

He so, so, *so* doesn't want to deal with this right now, especially since he knows his mother is well aware of what she's doing and what she's asking of him.

"Mom…"

"Take Ellie and Felicity with you where?" Felicity asks just as she and Ellie are leaving the garden.

"Gramma, look at the flowers I picked for Raisa!" Ellie says, running up to Moira with an armful of flowers. "I picked all yellow ones because they're her favorite."

"I hope it's okay, Mrs. Queen," Felicity says, sidling up next to Oliver as Moira bends over to examine Ellie's bouquet. Oliver wraps his arm around her waist without even thinking. "It was one flower and then two and suddenly…" She illustrates a small explosion with her hand, the other still holding her tablet. "Flower-splosion."

"Felicity, I asked you to call me Moira," his mother responds, giving her a warm smile. Felicity jerks slightly, not responding - he can just hear her thoughts on that, something like, '*Oh no, that won't be happening for at least another twenty years.*' He squeezes her side comfortingly and she glances up at him as Moira looks back at Ellie's flowers. "These are very beautiful, Ellie. I'm sure Raisa will love them."

"Yeah?" Ellie asks.

"Very much," Moira says. "We should get them in some water. How about I get a vase and meet you in the sunroom?"

"I can get the vase," Ellie volunteers.

"Oh no, dear," Moira says, shaking her head. The vases are kept in a pantry right off the kitchen - a wave of gratitude washes through Oliver at that; the last thing Ellie needs to see is the mess in there, and he really doubts she'd want to anyway. "How about you take those to the sunroom and I'll meet you there. They'll need all the sun they can get until Raisa's back."

"Is Raisa gonna be okay?" Ellie asks.

"She will be just fine," Moira replies, brushing her hand over Ellie's head, taming some of her wild hair. "And these flowers are just what she will need."

Ellie's face brightens with a huge smile that makes all three of them melt.

Moira stands, her eyes finding Oliver. She hands him the papers. "I'll have the car pulled around to the front."

"This is a bad idea."

"Yeah," is all Oliver can respond with. He is well aware, just as aware as he's been the last several times Felicity said it.

"But it's the only idea," Felicity continues, nodding. "And I know that. I'm glad, actually, because this is important, really important."

There hadn't even been a question of what to do with Ellie - the second Felicity had heard what Moira was suggesting, she'd agreed to going with, despite the obvious reservations about people seeing Ellie. The chances were slim to none, and even though they didn't know how Thea would react to the news about her future niece, there was no way he was leaving them behind.

"It wasn't the only idea," Oliver replies, reaching over Ellie to take Felicity's hand. "This could've waited until we figured… other things out."

"No," Felicity counters, looking at him as she laces her fingers through his. "Your mom is right, you can't lose everything your family's worked for."

Oliver smiles at her before glancing down at Ellie, who's strapped in between them in the back of the town car, her eyes glued to Felicity's tablet where the first ever Rascal the Raccoon episode is playing.

"The question is how much am I risking in the meantime," he says softly, brushing his free hand over her hair.

Ellie barely reacts but to bite her bottom lip, not looking up once. The look of glee on her face when Felicity handed her the tablet with the few episodes that'd been made so far had been enough to make his heart trip all over itself. It'd helped ground her, gave her something to

hold onto until she was back in her own time - god, he couldn't even think about that, he didn't want to - settled him as much as it settled her. He was damned thankful that the production company had *some* of the episodes, he wasn't sure what they would've done if they'd had to look their daughter in the eye and confirm that her world was definitely not what it was supposed to be.

Knowing and understanding were two very different things, especially for a three year old.

"We got this," Felicity says softly, pulling his eyes back to her. She nods, smiling encouragingly and he returns it, believing her. She takes a deep breath before asking, "What are you going to tell Thea?"

He has absolutely no idea.

Oliver would be lying to himself if he said he wasn't grateful that he hadn't had to fess up earlier, when Thea had been at the house. He hadn't been prepared for it, not in the least, and when his mother had suggested it - no, she'd practically demanded it - his stomach had slammed into the ground.

The one thing he'd always been able to depend on was the knowledge that he was protecting his family from the dangers in his life, from the danger he'd brought back with him, the danger he kept wrapped around him like a morbid cloak. He didn't want them to know because knowing meant they were vulnerable, open to attack, and the idea of losing them… he couldn't fathom it.

And yet now here he was - his mother already knew, and it was clear from what Ellie told them about the future that they don't exactly hide what they do at night.

Still… he has no idea how to even broach the subject, let alone explain it to Thea in a way that isn't completely and totally *insane*. He not only lied to her face about her parentage, but he'd also been lying about being the Arrow.

And on top of that, he has a daughter from the future with Felicity, who at this point is just his EA, according to what Thea knows.

So no, he has absolutely no idea.

Like she can read the turmoil twisting and turning in him, Felicity squeezes his hand, just as they pull up to the club. Ellie finally looks up, craning her neck to look outside.

It's deserted. The driver gets out, walking to the passenger side to let Felicity out first but Oliver doesn't let go of her hand.

"Wait for a second, okay?" he asks. She doesn't hesitate, just nodding and Oliver leans down, pressing a kiss to the top of Ellie's head before he gets out of the car. He nods to Frank, their driver, with a quick, "Hold on," as he steps out.

Oliver hears Ellie asking, "Where are we, momma?" and he doesn't wait to hear what Felicity says before he's shutting the door, his eyes scanning the area. He does a quick recon, checking every nook and cranny, dark crevice and potential lookout spots.

There's no one in sight at this time of day, even in the slightly gentrified part of the Glades. The club won't be drawing people for hours yet and the few less savory elements who might dare to cause trouble in the thick of the Arrow's turf won't come out until well after dark. It's as clear as Oliver could possibly hope for, with no movement at all beyond an alley cat clawing it's way through the remains of someone's lunch.

He wants to tell Felicity to stay in the car with Ellie, to let him go inside and handle Thea, but he knows she won't go for that, just as much as she probably wouldn't go for staying downstairs either.

With one more look around, he smiles at Frank who nods and opens the door for Felicity.

"We're seeing Aunt Thea?" Ellie instantly asks, practically launching herself out of the car.

Oliver barely has time to duck down and catch her, his eyes finding Felicity's. She looks a little guilty, shrugging with a mouthed, '*Sorry,'* because they hadn't exactly discussed the ins and outs of what they were doing there. The realization that he would have to tell Thea *everything* makes his heart take off.

Hauling his daughter up into his arms, Oliver says, "Yeah, sweetie. But daddy has to talk to her first, okay?"

Ellie nods with an almost contagious excitement as he offers Felicity his hand, helping her climb out of the car. She smiles at Frank with a, "Thank you," as he closes the door behind her. Felicity's other hand lands on Ellie's back and Oliver doesn't realize he's gripping her so tightly until she holds him back with just as much force.

Oliver shoots her an apologetic look.

"Is Uncle Roy here too?" Ellie asks. "Can we take him back to gramma's house, so he can play the dragon while we defend our castle, daddy?"

"Uh…" He hadn't even thought about Roy, much less *Uncle* Roy. Despite the guilt he still felt about sending him away, he's glad he did - he's sure one day he learns to trust Roy implicitly, if he lets him be around his kid, but right now, with the mirakuru in his system, there's absolutely no way he'd let her near him. "He's not here right now."

"Where is he?" Ellie asks.

"He's… at… work," Felicity fills in haltingly. She smiles, rubbing Ellie's back. "It's the middle of the day, sweetie, he's working right now."

"Oh. Okay," the little girl says, her shoulders falling slightly. "But we're still seeing Aunt Thea, right?"

With a deep breath, Oliver says, "Yep."

But his feet don't move.

"Any second now," Felicity says after a moment and Oliver glances at her. She gives him a small smile, and after a moment, he returns it.

"Yeah," Oliver says, pressing a kiss to Ellie's temple. His daughter makes a little sound and turns to look at him, her hand landing on his cheek with a, "Daddy, your beard is too sharp again," which makes him chuckle, centering him.

"Sorry, Ellie-bug," he says. Felicity's fingers squeezes his and he glances at her one more time before saying, "Here we go." And then he takes them inside, hopefully to fix the rifts with the rest of his family.

The club is quiet when Oliver opens the door. Felicity enters before him, the sound of her heels the only noise as he follows her in. Setting Ellie down, Oliver's hand finds Felicity's back as he says, "She's probably upstairs."

"We'll wait down here," Felicity says.

Oliver manages a tight smile before he goes upstairs.

He hears the sound of glass bottles on metal shelves before anything else. Oliver pokes his head into the upstairs office, instantly finding

his sister where she's stacking colored mix on the shelves. Her shoulders are tight, her movements almost robotic as she moves with a practiced precision that lets her work without having to think about it.

She doesn't indicate she sees or hears him, but he's pretty sure she's very aware he's there.

"Hey."

Thea doesn't respond, and he almost turns around, letting her be.

Instead, Oliver steps in, digging his hands into his pockets. He passes the window overlooking the club and he glances out, seeing Felicity lifting Ellie onto one of the barstools, holding onto her hand as their daughter rocks a little, making it spin.

It grounds him, giving him the courage to keep going.

"Thea…"

"I thought I was being pretty clear earlier when I didn't want to talk to mom," she says, dropping one of the bottles particularly hard. She looks at him, her face hard. The instant she gets a good look at him, she hesitates, looking like she wants to ask about the bruises littering his face and neck, but she doesn't. Instead she says, "Go away, Ollie."

He hesitates for a split second, almost taking her up on that. It'd be so much easier, to give her the space she clearly craves, but they don't have that luxury and if he's going to do this, he needs to just do it.

"I can't do that. I need to talk to you about some things."

"Oh," Thea scoffs. "Now he wants to talk to me." She picks up another bottle, shooting him a scathing look as she drops the bottle on the shelf without looking. "How convenient."

"I deserve that," Oliver concedes and Thea rolls her eyes, but he doesn't relent. "Thea, please, I'm trying here." If he hadn't been watching her, he wouldn't have caught it - she pauses, for a split second, before she continues putting the bottles on the shelf. It's not much, but it's enough, more than enough. She doesn't stop stocking. "Thea. Please."

And then… she stops.

Thea stares at the shelf, chewing on the inside of her bottom lip before she looks at him.

She's angry, he can see it in her eyes, but he also catches something else… he's not sure what it is, but he takes it as a good sign.

"Will you… sit down?" he asks. At that, her eyes instantly shutter. "Please."

After a long minute, Thea finally lets out a heavy sigh and moves to her desk, pulling her chair out abruptly. Oliver gives her a wide berth, pulling out another chair, sliding it a little closer but still giving her her space. The second they're settled, he realizes how close they are to the window - he didn't even *think* of that. What if she looks down and sees Felicity and Ellie? All the more reason to get talking.

"There's something I want to tell you, about me," Oliver starts. "But, um… I have something else to talk to you about too. We had that meeting with Ned Foster the other day…" She lets out an aggravated little noise, rolling her eyes again, and Oliver sighs, forging ahead before he loses the opportunity. "I know you're mad, Thea, but we may have found a way out of this financial mess where we aren't going to lose everything." He pulls out the piece of paper, opening it up. "Mom and I both signed, we just need your signature… and hopefully we can stop Isabel from ruining us."

"After you let her ruin us, you mean?" Thea replies, the words cold.

Oliver bites his lip, the familiar shame rolling through him. He gives her a short nod. "Yeah."

"That's what you wanted to talk about?" Thea asks, reaching forward to snatch the paper from his hands. She glances at it, her eyebrows going up in cool detachment. "It says Thea Queen here. Who's she?"

"That's you, Speedy," Oliver replies instantly.

"Ha," Thea says. "No. It's not. Robert Queen wasn't my father." The words hurt more than he could have ever imagined. "Malcolm Merlyn is."

"Thea…"

"Thea Merlyn," she continues. "Kinda has a nice ring to it."

"Meryln's your biological father," Oliver argues, "but Dad raised you."

"Only because he didn't know I wasn't his," Thea responds, the words coated in venom. "Mom *lied* to him, and she lied to me… and so did you, Ollie."

"I know," he replies, "I'm trying to make it better."

"There's no making this *better*," Thea retorts. She looks back at the paper, shaking her head before meeting his eyes again. "How about you bring this back when it has the right name on it."

"That *is* your name." She rolls her eyes again, moving to crumple the paper but Oliver stops her, his hands covering hers. "Thea, Dad loved you. And so do I. I'm still your brother."

"No," Thea says, "you're not. You're my half-brother, and you know who else was my half-brother? Tommy. Tommy… who I tried to kiss." She laughs, yanking her hands back. "I tried to kiss my half-brother, before my real father killed him! That's how screwed up I am!" She throws the papers on the desk. "And you know the sad part, I was actually starting to be in a really good place. I had the club, I had Roy, and I had a brother who wasn't lying to me. For the first time in my crazy life, everything didn't seem so completely and totally messed up."

Oliver stares at her, his heart breaking because she's right - and how much of that was because of him? And here he is, trying to take away *more* of that, trying to destroy more of her life? He'd helped build some of those lies, and even though he did it to protect her, he knew she wouldn't see it that way.

"I thought I was going to be okay…" Thea shakes her head. "I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid," he manages but Thea cuts him off.

"No, what I am is the daughter of two mass murderers." The words sting, because *he's* a murderer. He's killed… but he's changed. He's *changed*. "Not one, but two. So let's face it, Ollie, I was never going to be okay. It's not in my genes."

Oliver shakes his head. "No, no, it's not. That's crap. You're better, than both of them. You can choose to be better than both of them, there's always a choice."

"Yeah, well, it's not looking like that's the case," Thea says and the slice through him. She moves to stand up before pausing, looking back

at him. "Was that why you and mom came by? To get me to sign some stupid papers to protect your money?"

"Thea, that's not…"

"No, it's fine," Thea says, grabbing the papers and a pen. She signs them in a jerky motion, practically tearing through the page before shoving them at him. "Here, it's all yours." He tries to take her hand, but she yanks it back, dropping the pen as she says, her voice taut with resentment, "And just so you know, that's the last thing I'm signing as Thea Queen."

"Thea, please…"

Oliver's shoulders drop as she stands. He bows his head and it takes him too long to realize that she's not going back towards the shelves to stock more bottles, she's heading out of the office.

He shoots up out of the chair so fast it knocks it back but he's too late. Thea's already reached the stairs and he hears Ellie before he can say anything.

"Aunt Thea!"

Oliver leaves the office just as Ellie starts running up the stairs towards a stock-still Thea.

He doesn't have to see her face to know she's shocked, he can see it in the fine lines of her body as she grips the railing of the stairs, staring at the little human racing up towards her. She doesn't do anything as Ellie throws herself at her, hugging her legs, nearly knocking her backwards. If Oliver hadn't been there, she might have tumbled back, but his hand lands on her back steadying her as Thea's hands naturally fall around the blonde girl wrapped around her.

Ellie doesn't give either of them a chance to fill the painful void between them as she starts speaking, "Did daddy tell you about the pillow castle we built this morning? It's almost as good as the one you and I made last time, remember when we made it? When Uncle Roy tried to break it down but he couldn't get it because it was dragon-proof."

"Thea," Oliver starts. He can feel her trembling as she stares at Ellie. "Thea, sit down."

"And did daddy tell you about his missions?" Ellie continues, blissfully

oblivious to the turmoil around her, too caught up in the excitement of seeing her aunt. "Momma said he was telling you about the missions, but then I told her you already know about the missions because you shoot arrows too, and you said I'll be better than both of you one day. Daddy didn't like that, he was grumpy after you said that, remember? And you took me outside and showed me…"

Her words are throwing *him* for a tailspin, he can't even wrap his mind around half of what she's saying, and he can only imagine what it's like for Thea. Oliver can't let himself concentrate on the words flying from his daughter's mouth, because if he does he might freak out - *Thea* shooting arrows, already knowing about his "missions," which means she *knows* in the future - and instead he looks at his sister.

She's pale, dangerously pale, her jaw hanging open as she stares uncomprehendingly at the babbling three-year-old attached to her leg.

"Ellie," Felicity says sharply, cutting her off. None of them had noticed her racing up the steps until she grabbed Ellie, pulling her away from Thea. His sister's eyes follow the movements, moving up to meet Felicity's. She's looking between him and Thea like she's waiting for something huge to happen. Felicity picks Ellie up as she looks at him. "You didn't…?"

"What the hell is going on?" Thea asks, her voice thin. She looks at Oliver, and his heart breaks all over again when he sees the tears in her eyes… but it's not the tears shimmering at him that sends his heart dropping, it's the betrayal and confusion and *anger*. "Arrows? Missions?"

"Thea…"

"No, Ollie, don't… don't feed me more *lies*, damn it!" she snaps, jerking away from his touch.

Oliver lets his hand drop, his eyes flying to Ellie and Felicity for a moment. His mouth goes dry when he sees the concern on Felicity's face and the wide-eyed confusion on Ellie's.

This was a bad idea, a very, very bad idea. He'd known it, the second his mother had wanted Ellie to meet Thea, he'd *known* it, but he'd also let himself hope…

He'd been wrong.

"Who is this?" Thea asks. She looks at Felicity. "And who are you, I

don't… don't you *work* for him?"

"Well… not anymore," Felicity replies lamely, cradling Ellie closer to her chest. "It's a little complicated."

"Complicated?" Thea repeats incredulously, turning fiery eyes on Oliver. "Are you…?"

Oliver suddenly forgets how to speak as she stares at him with expectation, expecting him to fess up, to tell her everything… but he can't make his tongue work, he can't form the words. For the first time in his life, he finds himself shrinking under her gaze. She's suddenly looking at him in a new light, seeing him differently… and she doesn't like what she sees.

"Are you the Arrow?" Thea asks, the words coming out in a distressed rush.

The silence is so heavy it feels like a physical weight wrapping around all of them. Thea doesn't move, waiting, and he finally - *finally* - gives her a nod, a tiny nod, and whispers, "Yeah."

An incredulous laugh falls from her lips as she shakes her head. "Oh my god."

She's shaking even worse now, and Oliver almost reaches for her again, wanting to comfort her, but he knows it will only make things worse. Thea's eyes move back to Felicity and finally Ellie, who is looking at Thea with fear now - fear of the unknown, fear that this isn't *her* Aunt Thea.

"And you have a *daughter*," Thea says, her voice sharpening. "I have a *niece* I didn't even know about, how could you…?" She's speechless, her jaw moving to come up with something, but there's nothing.

"I can explain," Oliver starts.

Thea gives him a short, sharp laugh, cutting him off. She holds her hand up to him and when he meets her gaze, he knows there's no explaining, there's no coming back from this.

It's too much, all too much at once, and he watches his sister pull away from him completely.

She doesn't say anything else, there's nothing left *to* say… with a disbelieving, stuttered breath, Thea pushes past him and Felicity,

practically running down the stairs and leaving the club in a giant burst that sends the door slamming into the wall.

Oliver closes his eyes as Felicity whispers his name.

God, he'd thought things were bad *before*… he'd thought he couldn't push her further away than he had, that he couldn't possibly make things worse.

"Did I say something bad?" Ellie asks, her voice so small that it cuts right through everything that just happened, pulling him back to *her*, to Felicity. "Did I make Aunt Thea mad?"

"No, sweetie," Felicity says, her hand finding the back of Ellie's head. "No, no, that wasn't you. Aunt Thea's just… having a bad day, that's all."

"You didn't do anything, Ellie," Oliver says, taking the few steps still separating them in halting movements. He covers Felicity's hand on the back of Ellie's head, taking strength from both of them to push what'd just happened with Thea down - push the fear that he'd just lost his sister for good down, the shame and guilt, the worry… he pushes it all down, concentrating on his daughter. "It wasn't you."

Ellie doesn't look entirely convinced and Oliver forces himself to smile. Ellie instinctively returns it, and he lets the sight of her little smile comfort him.

And then he looks at Felicity.

"Are you okay?" she whispers.

Oliver nods, but they both know he's lying.

He doesn't get the chance to elaborate on it though as his phone rings, vibrating in his pocket. With a shaking hand, Oliver digs it out of his pocket, knowing instantly if it's his mother he won't have the strength to talk to her at the moment - yeah, he got the papers signed, but the cost of it had been too much, too damn high; he doesn't care about the company that much to lose his sister - but it's not her.

Oliver picks it up with a quiet, "John?"

"Turn on the news."

He closes his eyes, bowing his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What?"

"The news, Oliver, turn on the news. Now."

"What's wrong?"

"You have to see it to believe it, man."

"What's the matter?" Felicity asks.

"I don't know," Oliver replies, moving around her, jogging down the rest of the stairs. He goes behind the bar, grabbing the remote for the television and turns it on. He goes to the local news, asking Diggle, "Which…?"

But he finds it, and the instant he sees it, everything in him *freezes*.

"Oh no," Felicity whispers behind him.

All three of them are on the screen in still-shots, from outside the club - they're standing beside the town car, Oliver and Felicity holding hands, and Ellie's in Oliver's arms. There's several shots of them talking, of Oliver looking at Felicity in a way that he most definitely should not be looking at her and then there's one of him kissing Ellie's head, in what can only be described as fatherly, and Ellie looks completely content, like a toddler who knows she's safe with her parents.

The news anchor is talking, saying *something*, but all he sees are the words across the bottom of the screen, "*Oliver Queen's Secret Family?"* and underneath it is a continual trail of words, talking about secret relations with his executive assistant, what Felicity Smoak wants from the Queen family, and speculation about Oliver's injuries.

"Oh no," Felicity whispers again, like it's the only thing she can whisper. "Oh no."

Chapter 14

He hadn't seen anyone. *He* hadn't *seen* anyone. For a moment that's the only thought circling around his head. It doesn't make sense. There's no way a reporter could have evaded his attention and snapped pictures of Oliver with his daughter without him noticing. It's just not possible.

But, the stills fading into each other on the television screen tell him otherwise. There are pictures of all of them. Of him. Of Felicity… Of *Ellie*.

An irrational swell of anger fills his chest and he makes a tight fist, clenching his jaw so hard that his teeth grind together. The sight of her beautiful, guileless little face looking up at him in one of those shots, her hair shining in the sunlight - she looks so much like Felicity in that moment - makes his chest hurt. She's completely oblivious to the vultures invading their privacy.

"Digg, I'm gonna have to call you back," Oliver says, his words cutting the silence into ribbons. He ends the call, not waiting for a response, his eyes still glued to the screen, his hand falling to his side. The scene shifts before him and he stops breathing.

"Oliver," Felicity says in a hushed, strained voice, her hand flying out until she finds him. Her fingers grip his forearm tightly, nails biting little half-moon marks into his skin. But she isn't looking at him. No, she's staring up at the television too, the pictures having switched from the photos of his family to a live feed from Blood's campaign office.

It doesn't take a genius to root out the source of her redoubled nerves.

Blood himself is front and center - he's blatantly questioning the Queens' family values in a way that makes Oliver want to violently prevent him from speaking ever again - and a few steps behind him, barely inside the frame of camera, is a smirking, haughty Isabel.

The dots connect with blinding clarity. *Isabel*, this is *all* Isabel. She saw them on the cameras at the manor, she knows about Ellie. Oliver's stomach twists, the realization settling in his bones. She's Slade's backup plan, and while he doesn't fully know what that encompasses yet, it obviously includes using Blood to drag his family's name through the mud and turning the public eye on all of them.

On his *daughter*.

Isabel is more than aware of the feeding frenzy this is going to create, the spotlight it's going to shine on all of the Queens. And Felicity.

His hands are shaking as he shoves his phone in his pocket. Oliver turns, capturing Felicity's hand.

"We have to get out of here," he says, eyes instantly finding Ellie. She's staring at the screen, her brow furrowed in confusion. Oliver looks at Felicity. "If Slade knew where our base of operations was, we have to assume Isabel does too."

"Why were we on tv?" Ellie asks with a curious quirk of her head. "How'd we get there, momma? Is it the same way Rascal gets there?"

Her intelligent, inquisitive eyes light up as she asks her questions and something about that sweetly naive line of questions drives home his intense need to protect her. From Isabel and Slade's plans. From the media. From *everything*. He was supposed to keep her safe and all he'd done so far was put her life in danger in ways he couldn't have even imagined. He should have left her at the manor or found a safehouse. Or, at the very least, kept her more hidden… but the thought of leaving her anywhere he couldn't find her - couldn't *see* her, make sure with his own eyes that she was okay - left him feeling cold.

A quiet stab of guilt hits him that he needs that, even at the cost of her own safety, and his palms itch to hold her.

"That's a great question," Felicity says in response to Ellie, running her hand through the girl's soft blonde curls. "But we'll talk about it later, baby, okay? Mommy and Daddy have… something else we need to focus on at the moment."

"Give her to me?" Oliver asks quietly.

Felicity's eyes fly to his and he knows what she's hearing, but that's for later. She shifts Ellie in her arms, handing her over. Ellie's face brightens with a delighted smile at being in her daddy's embrace as she settles against his chest, her little fingers gripping the collar of his shirt. Felicity's hand lingers on their daughter's back and she steps closer to him without even thinking. The same unconscious drive has his hand finding her shoulder before sliding it down her arm.

"How did they get those shots?" Felicity questions, echoing his earlier thoughts. "Channel 52 isn't exactly known for stealth and… I mean,

you're *you*."

"It wasn't a reporter that took them," Oliver tells her with absolute certainty, his mind spinning through the dozens of ways they could have been taken, like something was just waiting for the perfect moment. "This is Isabel. She's probably been staking out Verdant since the moment she found out about Ellie. Maybe even before that. I'd guess that she has hidden cameras operated remotely."

"It's smart," Felicity concedes. "I don't like that she's so smart."

A ghost of a smile pulls at his lips, but it's gone in the next second as he holds Ellie closer, who rests her head in the crook of his neck like it was designed specifically for her. It was, he thinks. It was designed just for her.

The fierce surge of protectiveness fills him again and he grits his teeth.

"I looked," he says. "There was no one there, Felicity. I wouldn't… I wouldn't have brought Ellie out into the open otherwise. I wouldn't have risked that."

Felicity nods, her eyes telling him that she believes him, she knows he wouldn't have. One of her hands is still on Ellie's back and the other grazes his stomach. She grips his shirt lightly, chewing on her bottom lip. The intimacy of the moment isn't lost on him.

"Well," she says. "It might not have been reporters then, but it will be any moment." She looks at him, and the complete trust in her eyes bowls him over. "What do we do?"

It's never failed to make his chest tighten - the way she looks at him, knowing without a doubt that he'll do anything he can to make sure they're safe - and that's no different now.

His heart squeezes with an entirely different emotion at that.

"Let's take one thing at a time," he answers. "We need to get out of here, get somewhere safe, regroup and figure out what to do. How to respond."

"Where is safe right now?" she asks.

Her words shouldn't feel like a gut-punch - she doesn't mean them that way - but they do anyhow, because they're undeniably accurate. QC is entirely out of the question, that's Isabel's home turf these days. Even

if Isabel hadn't know the location of their lair, even if they *had* wanted to hide out downstairs in Verdant, it's *Verdant*. This is the only thing his sister calls her own right now and considering the exchange he just had with Thea, he seriously doubts they'll be welcome in her building for some time. The manor is bugged by the very people they're trying to evade. If Felicity's apartment isn't staked out yet, it will be soon. There's nowhere they can go where they have the upper hand. There's nowhere *safe*. It leaves him horribly on edge. This is his family. Keeping the city safe is one thing. He knows he won't win every battle. It's not even possible. But *this*… losing the battle to protect them… that's not an option.

"The manor," he resolves with a grimace. "It might have its downsides but at least it's familiar ground and we know where we're being watched." The idea of going right where he knows Isabel will be watching them makes him feel like he's turned inside out, but it's better than any of their other options by a longshot. "We can map out where the cameras are, where's safe, and go from there."

"Okay," she nods, agreeing easily, fully trusting of their safety in his hands. "Okay, so we go back to the manor and then we try to figure out our next move. We need to get a handle on Isabel's plans so we can kick her a-... *uh*… attitude," she finishes awkwardly as she spies Ellie staring at her. She smiles. "Kick her attitude, yup, that's what I was gonna say."

In spite of the situation, Oliver finds himself covering his laugh by ducking his head down to press his lips to the top of Ellie's head. But the moment of amusement is short-lived. Blood's voice breaks through the quiet moment he's found with his future family and it cements the tension that's been mounting in his gut since the moment he'd turned on the television.

"*... The public is clearly entitled to know who it is they're electing. Now, I'm not saying that there's more to discover about the Queen family, but this does beg the question, doesn't it? The cornerstone of Moira Queen's entire campaign has been her commitment to her family. Now we find out that she's been* hiding *some of that family. I, for one, think the voters deserve more transparency than that. If she'd hide a grandchild, what else would she hide? What else isn't she telling us?"*

"This is just the start," Oliver realizes aloud. Felicity stiffens, turning back to him. "This is the tip of the iceberg. Blood and Isabel are going to use this to drive the media into a frenzy."

"You think they'll find out you're the Arrow?" Felicity asks.

"I think it's possible that's what Isabel wants… amongst other things," Oliver agrees.

"Other things… like Malcolm being Thea's father?" she asks.

"If Isabel knows that, then it would definitely play into her hands," he sighs, the tension growing along his shoulders as all the ways this could play out poorly mount in his head.

"Then why wouldn't they just tell the press?" she asks. "Why not just give an anonymous tip?"

"Maybe she has," Oliver says with a sinking feeling. "But no respectable media outlet will run with something like that unless they have some kind of evidence. My mother's lawyers would be on them for libel in a heartbeat. And maybe… maybe she hasn't told the press because she wants us defensive. Maybe they want me under so much scrutiny that I can't risk being seen as the Arrow while the media is keeping such a close eye on us. Maybe they just want our hands tied by all the public attention while they're free to make other moves."

"That is so not comforting," Felicity deadpans.

He knows that. It's not like he likes the idea - either of the ideas - but they are the two most likely scenarios he can come up with. Either Isabel wants all the Queen family secrets exposed or she wants them so worried about being exposed that they're preoccupied with keeping them, leaving room for her to do whatever she wants around the city. Was she working that closely with Slade? Did she know what his next move was? Oliver knows, without a doubt, that Slade's plan didn't end with his attack at the manor, he's too smart for that, far too conniving. The question now is, will Isabel go through with it?

As the television shifts back to the anchor who is giving a wholly unflattering recap of his life thus far, Oliver says, "Let's talk more at the house. We need to get out of here before the press shows up." He lets out a heavy breath, his eyes darting towards the entrance of the club. Their location was clearly evident in the photographs taken, the unlit Verdant sign in the background of the shots. "If they haven't already."

"Right," Felicity says, her eyes still on the television, getting an eyeful of the herd of reporters crowding around him as he exits a restaurant with two women at his side. It's clearly from a few years before the

island and nothing he wants Felicity *or* Ellie to see. Oliver turns the TV off, tossing the remote back on the bar, and Felicity's voice is a little smaller as she finishes with, "The press."

It seems to galvanize Felicity because she's suddenly substantially more on edge, which is noteworthy because it's not like either one of them was exactly relaxed in the first place, but this is new turf for her. She's never had to deal with media scrutiny tearing apart her life. She has no idea how horrible that can be, how exposed and ridiculed it can make you feel. He does. He remembers it very well. He might not have been a focus of the press over the past few years, not in the way he was before the Gambit sank, but that sort of experience never fades from memory. And now all of the attention's going to be on her, on Ellie, because of him and who he is. A mystery child with a woman who just a few days ago was nothing more than his executive assistant, at least as far as the public were concerned? The goddamned story practically writes itself.

"I'm sorry," he says before he can stop himself. Felicity's eyes fly to his, her brow furrowing. "This isn't going to be pretty."

An incredulous look slips over her face as she smiles, a smile that tells him right then and there that she thinks he's being ridiculous. The sight of it instantly erases some of the weight off his shoulders - how does she do that? - as she says, "Oliver, I'm pretty sure things stopped being pretty the second I found you bleeding in my car from a bullet hole courtesy of your mother."

Oliver huffs out a little laugh that makes her smile widen a bit. It doesn't reach her eyes, but they're clear, practically luminescent. She may not know exactly what this is going to do to her life, not yet - expectations and reality are so very different when it comes to the media highlighting your every move, every experience - but she's not backing down. She won't. She never does.

God, he loves her.

"We'll get through this," Felicity says. Her voice is a little shaky, but she's resolute. She swallows hard, looking up at him. Some apprehension about their new situation shines through, but she's trusting, open, and he knows that his place at her side - both physically and emotionally - is fully understood. "Just like we get through everything else."

"We will," he responds. Oliver rests a hand against Felicity's lower

back. He rubs it in comforting, steady circles, pressing firmly enough that he knows his support can be felt with absolute certainty. He feels her relax minutely, but it's enough.

Felicity nods again, squaring her shoulders.

"Okay then, let's go." Felicity smiles at Ellie. "Ready to go back to grandma's?"

Ellie nods where she's resting her head against Oliver's collarbone. He shifts to wrap her in his jacket, hiding a fair portion of her tiny frame. In great contrast to her parents, she's fully relaxed, settling deeper into the small cocoon he's created for her. Oliver might worry about her safety, but she clearly doesn't worry about her own. She feels safe in his arms and he is beyond grateful that he can give her that, that she's *that* secure with him. Every part of him wishes he could give that to Felicity too.

"Stay next to me," Oliver says to her as they move towards the exit. "Try to hide your face and don't say anything to them."

Felicity stops him, her eyes widening. "You don't think they're already here, do you?"

"I think it's possible. But if they aren't, they're going to be relentless in the very near future," he advises. "It's best to ignore them completely, as much as you can. Ellie-bug, keep your face turned into me, okay? Just like it is."

"Okay," she says with a nod, her voice muffled against his shoulder. Her little curls bounce with the movement, tickling at his neck. The trust she has in him floors him, prompts him to hold her even closer, fueling his need to protect her. From the press, from Isabel, from the whole goddamned world.

That fierceness translates to Felicity and he laces their fingers together, squeezing her hand. "Ready?"

She's already shaking her head, her fingers gripping him tightly. "Probably most definitely not."

"Let's go," he tells her, realizing this is only going to get worse the longer they leave it.

"Right," Felicity agrees, steeling herself for the world outside with a steadying breath.

But she's not going this alone. Not by a longshot. Oliver doesn't give a damn how it looks at this point; he drops her hand and slides his around her waist, keeping her close. This is where he belongs. And, media scrutiny or not, he's not about to leave her side, not when he's finally realized he's precisely where he needs to be and with precisely who he needs to be with. Like it's the most natural thing in the world, Felicity turns into him and for the split second, holding his girls close, he feels like he's a thousand feet tall, like he can do anything, as long as he has them.

It's well into the afternoon and going from the moderately-lit club to the bright outdoors would have been a bit blinding on its own, but it's not the sun that sears his eyes when the three of them step outside. No, it's the harsh light of flashbulbs going off that makes everything momentarily go white.

Oliver hears Felicity's startled gasp, her arm wrapping around his waist, turning her face down to avoid the bright lights. He holds her closer, whispering, "Hang on," squinting against the flashes, trying to see...

Frank, their driver, is already moving to get between the two photographers invading their space and the little Queen family, but the cameramen aren't having that. They dodge him effectively, getting directly in Oliver and Felicity's path to the car with invasive cameras right in their faces, going off every few seconds, accompanied by even more invasive questions.

"*Mr. Queen! Why did you hide your daughter? How did the affair with her mother start? How does this affect your mother's campaign for mayor? Come on, Ollie, give us something!*"

He can ignore that one. It's a photographer he remembers from years back, one who worked for some tabloid rag with zero credibility and a readership that's mostly limited to those who skim headlines in line at the grocery store. It's the same crap that used to be thrown at him, and it's almost second nature to let it roll right off his back as he tries to push past them.

The other photographer though… the other photographer is a *problem*.

Because he's not talking to Oliver.

No, he's talking to Ellie.

"*Hey there, princess, give us a smile, will you?*"

"Back off," Oliver snaps, turning to shield his daughter, but the photographer brushes him off like he's not even there.

"*Just one, princess, smile for the camera… Look over here, princess, come on.*"

This piece of trash trying to manipulate his three-year-old into a payday is enough to make Oliver's blood boil, to make his muscles tense, to make him clench his jaw, and he has to fight the urge to reach out and yank that goddamned camera right out of his hands and smash it into the ground.

"*Just one smile!*"

Ellie whimpers at the loud voice demanding her attention, the bright lights flashing in her face, and she presses herself further into her father's chest, trying to get away from it all. She's shaking, not understanding what's going on. She's definitely picking up on her parents' anxiety as they fight their way past the people aiming cameras at them, and she's even more ill-at-ease with strangers shoving their way into her face.

"*Felicity, Felicity Smoak!*"

He feels Felicity jerk against him with surprise at the familiar way the other photographer shouts her name and he squeezes her side, reminding her she's not alone.

"*How did you get Oliver Queen? How old is your daughter, when did you meet him? Are you together now?*"

Felicity's shaking starts to match Ellie's and her attempts to push past them are useless. They're relentless, invading their space, bouncing back even as Frank pulls one of them out of the way.

"*One little smile, sweetie!*"

Ellie whimpers again, a tiny frightened, "Daddy?" reaching his ears, and that sends a rush of white hot anger flooding his system.

"I said back off!" Oliver growls, tightening his hold on both of them, but the photographer isn't listening.

No, he's reaching out, he's *touching* Ellie's arm, pulling on it slightly to gain her attention. Anger sears him and if that wasn't enough reason for Oliver to break the photographer's hand, in the next second, Ellie

yanking away from the foreign touch like she'd just been burned definitely is.

Something deep inside him *snaps*.

Oliver pushes Ellie into Felicity's arms. His little girl is shaking even more, desperately wrapping herself around her mother, and - *oh wow* - does that make his insides twist with a fury that only seems to be incited by his daughter perceiving danger of any kind. He had to watch a madman threaten his daughter's life that morning, had to hear her cries and feel her terror like it was his own, and now someone else is reaching for her, making her feel fear all over again.

It sends him right over the edge.

Ellie's barely settled in Felicity's arms when Oliver turns on the photographer, a seething rage propelling him, making him feel more like the Arrow than he ever has without the hood before.

"I said *back off*!" he snarls, grabbing the man's shirt and slamming him into the wall of the building with a vicious thud. The photographer lets out a sharp cry of pain that undoubtedly indicates the man will have a rather sizable bump on the back of his head come morning, but Oliver doesn't care. He likes it, he wants more, he wants to make sure this man never comes near his daughter again.

Oliver shoves his forearm into the horrible excuse for a photojournalist's neck, taking entirely too much satisfaction in the way the man's eyes go wide and he fights for shallow breaths that barely slip down his throat.

It all happens in the space of a few seconds, but it isn't long enough at the same time, knowing he doesn't have time to do what he wants to this piece of shit human being who scared Ellie, who dared to lay a hand on his little girl.

"Oliver!" Felicity cries out, but he's not hearing her. Not now.

"Touch my daughter again and I'll break your goddamned hands, do you understand me?" Oliver growls, his voice so low and gritty that he might as well be using the voice modulator for as threatening as it comes out.

He's pressing hard enough on the man's throat that he can't speak, but he does nod, wide-eyed and clearly taking Oliver's words quite seriously. Which is good. He should. Oliver means every damned

syllable of it and he makes sure the man knows it as he stares into his eyes, promising he'll do just that and more.

Dimly, he's aware that the flash of the other photographer's camera is going wild, capturing the moment from every conceivable angle, including pictures of Felicity where she stands holding Ellie, fright making her appear gaunt as she looks on, the uncertainty on her face telling him she's not sure *how* far he might go to protect them, and that's bad, so bad in their present company.

This was a set-up, Oliver realizes with sudden clarity. They were working together to get *this* shot. Ellie interests them, sure, but they want *him*, they want him unhinged. They want the Ollie who'd shoved around reporters and drunkenly smashed their cameras. They want the irresponsible media magnet of his youth.

With a vicious shove, Oliver lets go of the photographer, leaving the man gasping for air and rubbing his throat as he turns on the other one.

"Give me the camera," he orders.

It doesn't escape his attention that Frank's rounded Ellie and Felicity up and is pushing them toward the car. Oliver lets himself take a breath, finally, lets his shoulders relax just enough, all his concentration on the dirtbags before him.

"No way, man," the guy scoffs, though he looks more than a little terrified as he says it. "Come on, you know what a payday that is. Threaten me if you want, but the hell if you're taking my camera."

"You just conspired to intimidate and assault a toddler for profit," Oliver says, his voice low and dark, telling everyone around him just what he thinks of that. The guy's eyes widen, but he doesn't back down.

"Assault?" He huffs with a laugh that is most definitely edged with nervousness. "He touched her *shoulder*."

"He terrified a three year old and put a hand on her without permission," Oliver counters, taking a step towards him. The man reads it just as it is - a threat - and bounces back, but he doesn't relinquish the camera. Oliver makes tight fists, fighting the urge to grab him and just take it, some part of him knowing that would make this so much worse. "If either one of you go near my daughter again or if any of those pictures end up in the press, I'm going to have my

lawyers sue you both and I will press criminal charges."

"Wait, three?" the other photographer asks. Oliver winces before he can stop himself, glancing back with a hard glare. The rusty wheels in his brain work overtime to process that tidbit Oliver let slip and unfortunately he proves that he has at least two braincells to rub together to create a thought. "How the hell do you have a three year old?" He pushes himself off the wall, his eyes narrowed, his hand still on his throat. "You've been back for, like, two years."

"What are you hiding, Queen?" questions the first reporter.

Oliver forces himself not to move, to take a breath before he dismisses them both. He's got no answers for them - none he's willing to give or that they'd accept, anyhow - and he has *way* more pressing concerns than a pair of nosy reporters.

"Daddy!" Ellie calls from the car.

Oliver instinctively finds her. His daughter's curled up against Felicity's side but has dared to look back toward him and the reporters. Looking at her where she stretches out her fingers for him even as she leans back into Felicity drives home that her side - *their* side - is where he needs to be. It's so much more important than these stupid reporters.

"Expect a statement from my mother's campaign," Oliver tells them, moving toward the car. They converge again behind him just as Oliver changes his mind, turning back. They both flinch like he suckerpunched them and he takes a sinister joy in the fear on their faces. "I'm not kidding about those photos *or* if you dare try a stunt like this again."

Neither of them respond, both frozen at the clear promise in his voice.

Oliver turns back to the car with a short, "Frank, let's get out of here."

"Yes, sir."

As Oliver slides into the seat, Ellie tosses herself at him and his hand falls naturally to pull her closer.

The flashbulbs go off a few more times before he can get the door shut and without even thinking about it, he knows that'll be the shot that hits the papers. They'll listen to him about the more inciteful pictures of him pinning the photographer because they did instigate that one

and there were witnesses. But this… this they'll consider fair game. His little girl turning to him for affection and protection, her mother, stroking the back of her hair as she watches the father of her child welcome their daughter into his arms. The intimate little family moment is something they'll exploit completely. For money. For exposure. He *hates* it, so much so he can taste the acidic rage climbing up his throat, but he also knows how this works.

He really, really wants to get out and hurt them.

"I don't like them," Ellie whispers quietly against his chest as the car rumbles to life. "They weren't nice."

"No, honey, they weren't," he agrees. "I'm sorry."

"Didn't their mommas teach them to be nice?" Ellie asks, looking up at him with the most innocent wide-eyed gaze he can even imagine. It makes his throat tight and his heart ache because the truth that not everyone is a great person shouldn't be a thing she really has to understand yet. Not at three. And yet… and yet it's something that seems to be a constant in her life.

"Maybe they weren't very good listeners," Felicity offers after a moment when Oliver can't seem to find the words to reply to his daughter.

"That's naughty," Ellie declares, as if that resolves everything. She bites her lip hesitantly before glancing at Felicity. "Can I watch more Rascal?"

"Of course, come on over here," Felicity replies, patting the open space between them. Ellie picks up the tablet and starts Rascal the Raccoon again from the beginning, instantly losing herself in the familiar world of her cartoon friends.

He never in his damn life thought he'd be as grateful to a cartoon raccoon as he is in that moment. It's an instant mood stabilizer, giving Ellie something to hold on to in a world where everything isn't quite as it's supposed to be.

As they pull away, the last few minutes catch up with him.

Oliver lets out a heavy breath, scrubbing a hand over his face as the overwhelming twist this afternoon has taken settles over him. He might have dissuaded the reporters from using the worst of their photos, but he'd also referred to Ellie as his daughter. Openly. And

he'd blatantly stated her age, and *wow,* did that open a whole different can of worms that he can't even begin to process.

Fingers tangle with his, soft and easy, and he pulls his other hand away from his face to find Felicity looking at him with considerably more composure than he feels.

"I'm sorry," he sighs out. "I know I shouldn't have… I shouldn't have let them get to me like that, but the second he touched her…"

"Oh, no," Felicity counters with a huff. "They touched Ellie. You go ahead and pin them to walls and threaten them. A-plus plan. I'm on board."

He shouldn't be surprised. Felicity's never been one for pulling punches when they're needed and she's obviously fully in agreement that their daughter is off-limits. All the same, her endorsement of him manhandling the reporters, especially after her sharp, "*Oliver!"* when he'd lost it, takes him off guard and he finds himself chuckling and shaking his head at her in amazement.

"Well, I'm glad we're on the same page about that," he tells her, holding her gaze and marveling at the way that just *looking* at her can simultaneously put him at ease while making his pulse race. "But I still shouldn't have let it go quite that far."

"Well… okay, *maybe* you shouldn't have told them quite so much," Felicity agrees, sliding her fingers between his. She rubs her thumb against his inner wrist. "They're gonna run with it. It's going to be a problem."

Oliver sighs, closing his eyes. "Seems like we have a lot of those these days."

"There is definitely not a shortage," she agrees. "But at least with this one we have a bit of time to figure out how to deal with it." He concedes with a nod. She has a point. Felicity pauses and it's long enough that Oliver looks at her with raised eyebrows. She pinches her lips before saying, "You should call your mother."

If he flinches at this it's only because he's honestly never expected to hear those words out of her mouth.

"Her campaign is going to have to respond," Felicity reminds him. "About…" She waves at Ellie and then between them. "This, and we need to decide how. I'm so *not* going to leave that up to her campaign

manager because I can only imagine what they'll come up with. I know a lot's happened, but that doesn't mean I trust your mother all that much. Or, at all. Still." She winces, glancing at him. "Sorry, but someone who can casually talk about disposing of an actual body like it's whatever doesn't exactly have boundaries."

He's not arguing with her.

"I'm more worried about Isabel," Oliver confesses.

"Oh, me too," Felicity says. She leans back and for a split second he sees how much the weight of the last day has taken its toll. "Honestly, before all of this, I wasn't even sure I was going to vote for your mom. She *is* sort of a mass murderer and that's not usually something that really inspires my vote." She sighs. "But now it's pretty clear that we need her to win. Whatever Isabel is up to, she's backing Blood. It's part of *whatever* Slade's contingency plan is and, even though we don't know what that was yet, I'm pretty sure we don't want it to succeed."

"Definitely not," Oliver agrees.

"So maybe we do let her take the reins on…" She glances at Ellie and then their clasped hands before meeting his eyes. "This."

"One step at a time," Oliver says. "We need more information before we start saying anything to anybody, about their plan and what they're doing. Do you think…"

His voice trails off as he thinks because he's not sure he wants to acknowledge this thought. He's even less certain he wants to voice it.

"Do I think what?" she asks, scooting a little closer to him. Ellie wriggles between them, contented to be sandwiched by her parents, her eyes not leaving the tablet for a second, Rascal the Raccoon's adventures providing quiet background music to their conversation.

Which is probably better considering what he's about to suggest.

"Maybe we could… get him to tell us?" Oliver asks, choosing his words carefully. He glances down at Ellie, but she's oblivious.

"Get him to… *oh*," Felicity says in surprise as the words settle and she mulls them over. "Well… I think if anyone could get him to talk it would be A.R.G.U.S," she concedes. "But, Oliver, I wouldn't hold my breath."

"No," he agrees. "Even before he was infected, he was more than well-trained on how to withstand interrogation… but I think it's worth a try. I'll call Lyla, see if Waller's willing to have someone pressure him to answer a few questions."

"Okay," Felicity agrees easily - as if they aren't discussing torturing someone for information. "But, Isabel would be more likely to talk, I think."

"She's too high profile," Oliver says with a sigh. "I mean, you're right. I'm not sure how Slade could be… *compelled*. But Isabel, she's front and center in the press right now. There's no way we'd be able to confront them without drawing the wrong kind of attention." He looks at Ellie. "Especially now."

"Do you think that's why she's using the media?" Felicity asks, quirking her head to the side. "Is it a defensive move? An insurance policy?"

"If it is, it's a damned good one," Oliver confides, keeping his voice low. "If the press is following us everywhere, I can't walk in somewhere as Oliver Queen and then have the Arrow walk back out. And neither one of them can disappear without the wrong sort of questions being asked."

"So we look for another weakness," Felicity resolves. "We figure out what they want and we use that. And we sure as hell make certain that your mother wins this election."

"What's 'hell' mean?" Ellie asks, looking up from her tablet.

Felicity's face turns about four shades of red at the question and she is - for once in her life - totally speechless for a moment.

"It's… I... " she sputters, but nothing else comes out.

"Mommy said the wrong word by mistake," Oliver tells Ellie. "She didn't mean that. It's not a nice word. We don't use that word, okay?"

"Oh… okay," Ellie says, looking back down at her tablet.

"*Sorry*," Felicity mouths toward Oliver, still somewhat resembling a ripe tomato. "Future-me is obviously way better with the brain-to-mouth filter thing, which we both know is a *feat*, so go future-me. But how the… *heck*," she mouths that word too so Ellie doesn't hear it, "am I supposed to know now how much of a sponge she is?"

"I'm not a sponge, momma," Ellie says and Felicity's jaw snaps shut. "Spongebob is a sponge, I'm not a sponge."

"It's like she can turn it on and off," Felicity muses under her breath. She looks at Oliver. "At least Spongebob is still around I guess, that's something to look forward to beside my corrupting our child."

Oliver can't possibly help the grin that spreads across his face at that, at the absurdity of her statement - she's one of the purest people he knows, there's no way she'd corrupt anyone, much less their daughter. He leans over to kiss her temple. She's just too damned adorable not to. His chest warms when she leans into him.

"It's fine," he murmurs lowly into her skin. "Don't worry about it."

"Oh man, we're gonna have parent-teacher conferences where I have to explain why our daughter says things like *that* and it's going to be all my fault. Sometime in the future I'm going to blame past-me for introducing cursing to our child," she mutters in embarrassment.

He laughs, letting himself relax in his seat a bit more. "Yeah, that's what I'm worried about right now, future parent-teacher conferences."

"Oliver…" she groans.

"No, really," he continues, squeezing her hand, because as ridiculous as it sounds, it's true. "Isabel has some evil plan of Slade's to execute, she's using Blood to smear our names across the media to try and beat my mother in an election, and reporters are shoving cameras in my daughter's face and baiting her - and me, by extension... but what I'm actually concerned about is a teacher years from now possibly telling us that our daughter used a curse word in class." Oliver looks at her. "She'd be taking after her mother."

"That is so not funny, Oliver," Felicity says, but she can't contain the laugh that slips out as she pushes on his shoulder with her free hand.

Her laughter is contagious and he chuckles, catching her hand in his. Oliver laces their fingers together for a split second, tightening his grip on her other one, and presses a soft kiss to her fingers.

"As long as it's coming from you, I don't care what she does," he says. Felicity's face softens and his heart stutters at the warmth in her eyes before adding, "Even if it's her cursing up a storm in the classroom."

"I won't," Ellie interrupts, not even looking up from her tablet. "I don't

like things that aren't nice. Santa doesn't bring presents to kids who are naughty." She looks up at Oliver. "Can I have ice cream when we get home?"

Her change in topics is enough to give him mental whiplash.

"Uh, well…" He pauses. Does she eat ice cream often in the future? Do they even *have* ice cream at the manor? "We'll see, okay?"

"Okay," she agrees easily with a nod. "I hope so. I hope we have strawberry. With *sprinkles* even. The rainbow kind."

People talk about how resilient kids are - he's heard that before - but he doesn't think he'd understood it until now. That Ellie can be held by a madman in the morning, watch her father almost die, have a nightmare that nearly sends her into hysterics, be shunned by her beloved aunt, get grabbed by a reporter and have cameras shoved in her face but *still* focus on something like how much she wants *ice cream* is utterly mindboggling.

"You know what?" he says as he thinks about how precious it is that she wants something so simple, so childlike and innocent. "Yes, you can have ice cream. After dinner. And if we don't have strawberry, we'll get some, okay?"

"Really?" she asks delightedly, looking up at him with sheer delight on her face. "With sprinkles even?"

"Rainbow ones," he confirms and she grins happily.

"Thank you, Daddy," she tells him, dropping the tablet to hug his torso tightly. Oliver grins, hugging her back, dipping down to kiss the top of her head.

"Oliver Queen, you are a complete pushover," Felicity declares. Her voice is wistful and the complete opposite of judgmental.

He's definitely a bit of a pushover for Ellie, but he's not exactly sorry about that. In fact, it's sort of a point of pride at the moment. Oliver can only manage a half shrug in sheepish agreement. Felicity shakes her head in what he's sure is supposed to be chastisement, but it seems like she's enjoying it just as much as he is.

"Mr. Queen," calls out Frank all of a sudden, reminding Oliver about their driver's presence. "Sorry to interrupt, sir, but we're nearly back to the manor and we might have a bit of a problem…"

Oliver glances out the window. His jaw drops. A solid dozen reporters are lined up in front of the gate and the instant they spot the car, they come to life like hornets who've had their nest disturbed. They goddamned *swarm*.

The windows to the town car are tinted, there's no way they could possibly see in, but that doesn't stop any of them from pushing their cameras right up against the glass, the flashes going off, while others shove microphones up against the edges of the windows.

"Oh. *Wow*," Felicity says, equal parts startled and amazed. "This is *crazy*."

She's right. He's been in the public eye a long time, but he's never seen the media like *this*. They're hungry for this story - *ravenous*.

On the surface, he gets why. It's sex and politics, secrets and money. The press loves nothing as much as it loves a scandal and so far this has all the hallmarks of an epic one. He's the prodigal son who returned from the dead but seemingly lost everything only for it to be revealed that he has a secret child whose legacy he's let slip through his grasp. So… yeah, he gets it in theory.

But in practice, the instant she recognizes what's happening, Ellie clings to his arm and tries to sink back against the seat to make herself seem smaller and he can't understand how anyone with any semblance of a heart would do this to her.

Oliver and Felicity move at the same time, wrapping themselves around her.

"What would you like me to do, Mr. Queen?" Frank asks, looking back at them, offering a thin, reassuring smile toward Ellie.

"Is driving through them not an option?" Felicity asks. That earns a surprised look from both men and a furrowed brow from Ellie. "Kidding… sorry, that was… a bad joke. *Obviously* we can't drive through them. That would be bad. We could hurt someone."

Ellie seems mollified by that, but Oliver is well aware that Felicity wasn't entirely joking. And he can't blame her because he's not sure he's all that opposed to the notion himself. Still… as bad press goes there's very little that would be worse than driving through a throng of reporters, no matter the intention.

Oliver sighs, glaring at a pesky reporter knocking on the window right

next to his head, even though she can't see him.

"I need your cell phone," Felicity says suddenly, holding out her hand expectantly.

"Okay…" he agrees, pulling it from his pocket and handing it over. "Why?"

"Because we need reinforcements," she tells him, unlocking his phone - he's not at all surprised she knows the password even though he's never told her - and scrolling through his contacts.

"Did you lose your phone?" he asks in confusion as she puts the phone to her ear.

"Of course not," she says, looking at him like he's crazy. And… okay maybe that is a little nuts. Felicity losing a piece of tech would be like him losing his bow.

"So you needed my phone because…"

"Because I don't have the number," she replies before someone picking up pulls her attention away. "Hi! No, it's Felicity. We're in the drive but we can't get past the gate. There are reporters blocking the car. Do you think you have some people who could get rid of them for us? ...I mean that in a non-permanent sort of way. Obviously. Because dead reporters would be completely counterproductive at the moment. Or, well… *mostly* counterproductive. There'd be a few less of them writing stories anyhow. That part would be a definite plus..."

"Are you talking to *my mother*?" Oliver asks, blinking at her as her words click into place.

"Thank you, Mrs. Queen - *Moira*," Felicity self-corrects immediately, confirming his suspicions before she *laughs* at something his mother says. Oliver feels like maybe the earth has just started spinning backwards or Isabel decided to give up her evil crusade in favor of donating her time to rescuing abandoned kittens or something equally impossibly ridiculous. Because Felicity is *laughing with his mother* and his brain can't process.

When she hangs up the phone, handing it back to him, he doesn't take it. He just looks at her.

Felicity blinks. "What?"

But, strange as the moment is, it only gets more surreal when the gate slides open and four men Oliver vaguely recognizes from the security at his mother's campaign events stroll out, Sara standing smack dab in the middle like a general leading her troops. All-in-all, it's not a bad analogy - she's clearly in charge.

"Oh, that's… huh…" Felicity pauses, sounding slightly unsettled. "Not who I expected."

Sara and the men are already moving, herding the chaos outside out of the way, making it far more manageable and passable, letting Oliver concentrate on what he just heard in Felicity's voice. This is the first time they've both seen Sara since… everything.

He's wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her close before he can think twice, sandwiching Ellie between them enough that she squeaks and laughs, wriggling a bit to make herself some room.

"She's not mad," Oliver reminds Felicity. He presses a lingering kiss to her forehead. "And she likes you. There's no *blame* here, you have nothing to worry about."

"I know…" Felicity says, but the doubt is obvious in her voice and Oliver can't help raising an eyebrow at her as the car starts slowly moving toward the now-open gate. "It's just… you two were a *thing* for a long time and that ended all of a day ago, Oliver. You haven't even seen her since you broke up."

He blinks at her, surprise dawning in his features.

"Are you seriously questioning if I'm going to regret breaking things off with her?" he asks in amazement.

"No… maybe?" Felicity replies, pinching her eyes shut and shaking her head. "I don't know. It's just… it's a lot, Oliver. And there's a lot of history with you two."

"And there always will be," he agrees. "I can't change that. And, I wouldn't if I could. We saw each other through a lot. I wouldn't have gotten through most of what I did without her. But it's also firmly in the past. You have to know that. Everything I want - *everything* I want - is right here in this car."

Felicity stares at him, and everything slowly fades away until it's just them, in their little cocoon, just like the night before in bed. They're

both very aware that Ellie is right there, but that doesn't do anything to deter the moment, or to inhibit the way the air around them grows heavy - heated, thick with a sense of anticipation that sets his nerves alight.

Oliver can't bring himself to look anywhere but her eyes as her pupils swamp the familiar blue. She traces the lines of his face with her gaze, like maybe she's appraising him anew. If she is, it's obvious she very much likes what she finds. Oliver smiles softly, a tiny quirk of his mouth that has her eyes dropping to his lips in a way that makes suddenly *everything* a little too warm before meeting his eyes again.

This is new - all of it is *so* new, but it's already intoxicating. Even if he has to do it every day, he'll reassure her that this is what he wants, if that's what she needs. He'll tell her until she believes it, until she *knows* it, just as surely as he does.

For the moment, he's succeeded, and when she leans in, her hand coming up to grip the sleeve of his jacket...

"As touched as I am to be wanted and valued by my employer, sir," Frank pipes up from the driver's seat, effectively breaking the tension of the moment, jarring Oliver's attention. "We're here."

Felicity blushes, ducking her head as Oliver chuckles to the sound of Frank climbing out of the car.

"You've got more of a sense of humor than I remembered, Frank," Oliver tells him when the other man opens the door for them.

"I have my moments, sir," Frank acknowledges, clearly fighting back a smile as he offers Ellie a hand out of the car. "Will that be all for the night?"

Oliver chances a glance back toward the gate. The reporters aren't dumb enough to trespass on private property - not at *this* point anyhow, not right in front of him - but the glare of their lights are still evident and he knows they're filming even now.

"Yes," Oliver confirms, looking back at Frank before scooping Ellie up and holding her protectively against his chest. "We aren't going anywhere for the time being."

Given the state of the frenzy at the gate, he wonders if that isn't a massive understatement.

"Very good, sir," Frank nods. "You know, I was thinking the garage could be cleaned out, sir. The car might need to spend the evening in the drive. Terrible timing for those reporters, though. It just might make it difficult for them to get an easy shot."

Oliver grins widely and grips the driver's shoulder in gratitude.

"I think I like you, Frank," Oliver tells him.

"Sir, I've driven you on and off for more than a decade," Frank tells him. "And I'm most pleased to say that at long last I return that sentiment."

Felicity actually *snorts* in amusement from his side, but Frank just grins down at Ellie, winking at her before turning back to the car. Good to his word, he drives it right up to the gate, parking it lengthwise directly in front of a slew of incredibly annoyed reporters.

But Oliver only has a moment to delight in their angry protests because a second later his mother opens the door widely and takes them in with a harried look of relief.

"Oh thank goodness," she declares. "Get inside before this gets worse."

"Hi, Gramma," Ellie greets from her place tucked against Oliver's chest, seeming none the worse for wear given her situation.

"Mom…" Oliver starts warily.

"Not yet, Oliver," she chastises sharply, eyeing the lawn with distrust. "In the house."

She ushers them in with an air of authority that Oliver had long ago learned to expect from his mother.

"Felicity, why don't you take Ellie into the den for a few moments?" Moira suggests.

"No, Mom," Oliver says immediately, grabbing Felicity's hand to keep her at his side. "She's not going anywhere."

The annoyance on his mother's face is unmistakable, but Oliver's standing firm on this. He's not excluding Felicity. Not in this. Not in anything.

"Oliver…" his mother starts, with a tone that clearly says he's trying her patience and she's not all that happy at having to explain herself.

"There are some things not suitable for little ears and we can hardly leave her unattended, even in the house. One never knows who might be watching."

"Oh, I have a pretty good idea of who's watching and so do you. That's basically the cause of our current problem," Oliver points out. "But this involves Felicity. I'm not shutting her out."

Moira Queen lets out a huff of annoyance that somehow seems dignified and looks toward the ceiling as if she's seeking patience.

"Fine," she finally says. "We think we've come up with a solution to the… news of your being a parent breaking, as it did. It's clean, it's simple and it explains everything."

Oliver blinks in surprise. He turns to look at Felicity, who looks just as taken aback as he is, although he can see her mind jumping ahead a couple paces, trying to figure out what his mother is getting at. Her eyes dart to his before going back to Moira, the fine lines around her eyes tensing as she waits.

"What is it?" Oliver asks.

Moira hesitates, and he knows right then and there that he's going to hate what she says, especially when she looks down at Ellie and then at Felicity.

"Mom."

She pinches her lips together, still not speaking. And then she looks at Oliver, and it's the calm, cool collected woman who did everything to protect her family for all those years staring back at him.

"You have to publicly disclaim Ellie as your daughter."

Chapter 15

She hears him the second she opens the door.

The repetitive sound of his fists slamming into something heavy and unmoving echoes up the stairs, highlighted by periodic grunts and what sounds like low growls from a room at the far end of the basement. The door's open, a rectangle of light at the end of a short hallway, a door she can only assume leads to a gym - of course there's a gym in the Queen Manor, there's probably an Olympic-sized pool hiding somewhere.

Felicity barely pauses to notice the rest of the basement level of Queen Manor, making her way down the steps and towards him. Most of the underground level is dark but she can see it's near-utilitarian compared to the rest of the house, barely decorated with a neat but threadbare carpet that has the kind of chill that comes with a place that's rarely used.

Except for the gym, where he is.

The room is open and spacious, harsh fluorescent lights spotlighting the ridiculous amounts of equipment… and him, where he stands in the corner by a series of punching bags hanging from hooks in the ceiling. His body is tightly coiled as he pounds his frustrations out on the swinging leather bag. The chain groans when it swings, and it's the only other sound save for his heavy breathing and the ugly sound of his knuckles being torn up.

Despite that - really, it should be her only thought, because it doesn't sound pretty, and even though she knew she'd find him down here stewing, it's different to actually see it than to imagine it - she can't help but… stare.

Felicity has seen Oliver shirtless many times - many, many times - in varying degrees of sweatiness, when he works out or wanders around or undresses after a mission - which she only saw once, on accident, and she nearly took an eye out when she'd turned away with a quiet, "*Oh!*"

Any which way she's seen him, it never fails to take her breath away, never fails to make her feel a familiar warm tug in the pit of her stomach, one that slowly grows into a pool of welcome heat as she watches him…

This time is no different.

He's still wearing his jeans from earlier, and they're still just as snug, somehow *more* snug since he's also shirtless, his skin covered in a light sheen of well-earned sweat. The band of his pants hugs his hips, shifting with every move he makes, every jab… his muscles contract with each breath, hard and… muscly… and he's barefoot.

That has her heart skipping a beat.

But now something's different. Maybe it's because she can actually stare, or that she's letting herself stare, or because she knows why he's down here, what he's doing, and his reasons for it… whatever it is has a shiver falling down her spine, making her stomach clench with an awareness she's never felt around him. Felicity swallows past the dryness in her mouth, oddly aware of how hot her fingertips are where she grips the doorjamb, that her skin feels tighter, her breasts heavier.

Something's definitely different, and she knows without a doubt that it has everything to do with Ellie.

It's been there, ever since she realized she had a child with Oliver, but it was cemented at the sight of his face when Ellie whispered, "*Hi, daddy*." It was sewn into her very foundations when the little girl launched herself into his arms, when she saw him curl around her, protecting her without a second thought, the urge to protect the child he *knew* was his… the child he has with her. That memory alone tugs at her core, in a way that makes her next breath shaky.

Felicity hasn't really had the chance to sit down and examine it, to think about it, to realize what she's feeling and why she's feeling it, but it was always there, simmering in the recesses of her mind, there but barely out of view.

Well, the reality of him needing to deny that Ellie is his child is shoving everything into a new light.

They haven't talked about what they are yet, what they'll become or what either of them really wants. They haven't really had the chance to sit down and do much of anything because the second they slow down, something else happens and they're tossed back up into the air, hoping to *at least* land right-side-up so they can see the next thing coming for them.

There's so much to do, so much to figure out and plan for and worry

about, to *freak out* about…

Later.

Because right now, they need a *them* moment. They deserve that and she's taking it.

Felicity knows he's aware of her. She sees the tiniest tightening of his muscles, the way his head turns slightly, like he's acclimating himself to her entering his environment.

He doesn't say a word and neither does she. Hell, she wouldn't know where to start even if she wanted to. How exactly do you start a conversation that gets into the whys and hows of their future daughter being outed as their child? One that broaches, amongst other things, that to keep her safe - to keep them all safe - he has to get up in a roomful of strangers and say she isn't his?

Like he can hear her thoughts, Oliver punches the bag harder with a vicious exhale of air, sending it swinging. He's almost telegraphing that he wants to be alone, that he *needs* to be alone. A few days ago, she would have respected that. She would have backed off and left him in solitude, let him work through his issues, knowing he would find her after if he still needed to talk.

Not now.

She might have allowed him the space to stew a week ago, but that was before Ellie, before someone snapped the perfect family photo of them and plastered it all over the nightly news to pry open a can of worms that didn't exist about 'Oliver Queen's secret family'. A *secret family*, like they're something he's ashamed of, something he's been trying to hide, something that he just slipped up on when a camera caught sight of them.

Like *hell* she's leaving him alone right now.

Oliver hits the bag even harder.

She knows he wants to punch it until it explodes - or better yet, go outside and take out his frustrations on the crowd of reporters and cameramen hounding the gate - but she also knows it won't do anything to actually *help*. It's just going to churn his anger. And getting up tomorrow morning at the press conference that Moira's already scheduled - standing in front of those cameras and lying to everyone with quiet regret and unspoken bitterness coating his tongue

- that will only make it worse. Felicity could see the foundations of this forming the instant he'd fallen silent after his impassioned argument with his mother. That split second when he'd finally caved, when something inside him had accepted her words, cracked under the strain of reality. He'd closed his eyes, taken a breath…

"*Fine."*

He'd nodded, and she'd seen him pushing it down, she'd seen the realization come over him when the inevitability of Moira's words sank in. His knee-jerk reaction to counter his mother's proclamation had been something he'd clung to even as she'd worn away the edges of his resolve, chipped away at his certainty that there must be another option.

Because there wasn't. It had just taken him one long, heart-wrenching conversation to realize the truth of that.

"*You have to publicly disclaim Ellie as your daughter."*

He'd been quiet and she hadn't pushed, because he'd stayed right by their side all the way through Moira explaining the plan. It almost sounded too easy. Her campaign manager was already drafting a loose script for him - "*just for guidance, to get the main point across without bringing too much emotion into it, because it will be hard, Oliver."* He'd remained beside her through dinner, the tense meal made lighter only by Ellie's oblivious rambling, before the three of them had escaped upstairs to his room with the intention of getting away from the cameras - something they still hadn't talked about - and going through the boxes of toys Raisa had apparently found in the basement before Slade's attack.

But then…

"*What's disclaim mean?"*

The question had come out of nowhere. Felicity had barely managed to answer with something that didn't make her stomach revolt - she couldn't even remember now what she'd said - when Oliver had suddenly stood up.

"*I'll be back in a few minutes."*

Well, it's *been* a few minutes, and that's all she's giving him.

Moira had seemed more than happy to keep an eye on Ellie for a bit.

In fact, if Felicity wasn't mistaken, the Queen matriarch's eyes had reflected a hint of both pride and approval as her intentions had become clear. It had been *weird* seeing that look on Moira Queen's face directed at her, but that thought isn't something Felicity intends to dwell on at the moment. It's Oliver who has her whole focus. It's him who needs her, even if he doesn't seem to know it at the moment.

She steps into the room, toeing her shoes off, her socks next, and without glancing at any of the other equipment heads for the smaller punching bag that hangs a few feet away from his.

He finally stops when she enters his line of sight, his head turning just enough to look at her as she plants her feet in front of her own punching bag. She spreads her feet, remembering what Sara told her once about stance and power, back when Felicity hadn't been thinking the kindest thoughts, when she felt like Sara had been encroaching on her territory, territory that had included Oliver.

Funny how things work out.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his voice rough.

It almost makes her turn to him. She almost gives him a sympathetic look that says she knows exactly what he's feeling… alright, maybe not *exactly* but a look that says she's *here* for him in every way she can be. She doesn't though. She reins in that impulse because she can see how that would play out - him withdrawing even more, pulling back because she *doesn't* get it but he still appreciates her efforts so he'll put on the happy face… She's not sure what he's looking for down here, but she knows it's not validation for his feelings. It's something else.

So…

"I thought I'd see if hitting things makes me feel better too," Felicity replies, making tight fists, preparing to punch the bag. "It's gotta do some good, right? You're so focused on it, it must be doing *something*…"

Felicity pulls her arm back, gritting her teeth, preparing to hit the thing as hard as she can - it *is* worth a try - but Oliver cuts her off.

"Well, like that you're going to make yourself feel a whole lot worse." He abandons his punching bag, moving towards her. "Punching bags move. It's not like the dummies at the foundry."

Felicity furrows her brow - and that means what exactly? - when

Oliver steps up behind her, reaching around her to cover her hands with his. Her heart simultaneously leaps at the touch just as much as her stomach twists when she sees the damage he's done to himself. The skin is cracked over his knuckles, already bruised and covered in bloodied streaks. He's warm, his palms a little damp with sweat as he adjusts her fists, turning her wrist on her right hand as he tucks her left arm closer to her chest.

"You'll break your wrist if you hit it wrong," he says. His voice is soft but it's not *her* voice, his '*Felicity'* voice, and they both know it.

She wants to pull his hands up and press her lips to the broken skin, she wants to chastise him and kiss him silly, but she knows it'd be futile. Still, she needs to do *something* so she unwinds her fist and turns her hand so their palms are touching, lacing her fingers through his.

His breath catches, his bare chest grazing her back for a split second, and for an instant he tightens his hold on her, gripping her hand. She looks back at him. His eyes are glued on their hands, a mixture of wonder… and something that looks like regret. Oliver loosens his fingers but she doesn't let him let go.

"So show me how to do it right then," Felicity says, leaning back against him with a little nudge. His reply is to sigh, his shoulders falling, and she doesn't relent. "I think we do things better when we work as a team. Don't you?"

The silence between them seems to stretch on forever.

"I know what you're doing," he finally says, sounding distant and far away, like he's trying to pull back but he can't. He leans into her for a second, pressing his face into her hair where he takes a deep breath before releasing her hands.

She doesn't let him go, though, and she feels his biceps tighten around her. To pull away or in aggravation or fighting the urge to give in, she's not sure. It's probably some mixture of all of that. Oliver is a whirlpool of emotion right now, all of it churning and mixing in a violent fury that threatens to drown him in the undertow. Luckily for both of them, she's here to keep that from happening.

"Well," Felicity replies, "I wasn't exactly being subtle about it, Oliver." She pulls his arms back around her and he sighs again. "Show me."

"Felicity…"

She looks back just as he pulls away from her, unwinding his fingers from hers, stepping back… away from the comfort she can offer him, the support she wants to give him. His eyes are closed, his jaw clenched tight, and she turns to face him as he rakes his hands through his hair.

There's so much going on in that head of his right now, none of it good, and she's sure that he doesn't know how to resolve any of it. While she doesn't exactly know how to fix any of this either, she can at least do *something*. Or try. But he has to let her.

"We're partners in this," Felicity says. "And I know this is hard for you, but-"

"You don't," he counters sharply, cutting her off with a hard look. For a split second, he lets her in, lets her see the simmering anger and pain deep inside him. It takes her breath away just as much as it speaks to her own anger and she instinctively moves to him, but he steps back again and she pauses, waiting. He's biting the inside of his lip and, as if the pain is a trigger, she sees the shutters come back up. But not completely. He bows his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to… but you don't. You don't…"

Oliver stops, unable to voice it.

"Okay," Felicity agrees with a little nod. "Maybe I don't. But I'd like to." He gives her a tired look and she answers with a plaintive smile. "This is one thing we have to be partners in, Oliver, there's no you or me. It has to be us." A look she can't name crosses his face, one that makes her move towards him again before stopping herself. Her palms itch to reach out but she doesn't. "Talk to me. Tell me what's got you down here punishing yourself." Felicity closes her eyes. "That probably could've been worded a bit better. I just… Why are you down here, by yourself, when you could be upstairs. With your family."

The word 'family' seems to echo throughout the entire room, and she sees it hit him like she's just touched a raw nerve. He winces, pressing his lips together into a thin line, his eyes never leaving her until it becomes too much and he turns away.

"Oliver," she starts, moving to go after him, raising her hand to touch him, her eyes on his tight shoulders, on the movement of his muscles as he buries his face in his hands before he abruptly turns back, startling her.

"I'm just…" His voice cracks, his hands making tight fists before he

releases them with a wince. He takes a shaky breath, gritting his teeth before he lets it all out, his shoulders collapsing under the weight. "I'm watching it all slip through my fingers."

Felicity's heart breaks.

"Watching what slip through your fingers?" she asks softly.

"This," he says, gesturing towards her. Her chest tightens and the rush of tears burns her eyes. She blinks them away, taking a steadying breath. "Her. You. All of it."

She has to bite her tongue to keep herself still as he speaks, as he lays it all out.

"For the first time…" He lets out a humorous laugh. "For the first time *ever*, I let myself think I could have this. I could be happy and live the kind of life I want to, but now… now I have to deny it." He pauses, and she can *see* his struggle as he stares at her, almost begging her to find a way to make it better. "I have to say she's not mine and this isn't really my family, because it's not *safe* otherwise."

That has her stepping towards him again with a quiet, "Oliver," as she shakes her head, but he's not done.

"Will it ever be safe for her?" he demands, a quiet desperation coating the words. "Someday things are so bad we have to send her to *another time* for her own protection. Is that the only kind of life I can offer her? She's so… she's *perfect*, Felicity, she's… I love her so much, and I love…"

Her stomach drops, her eyes widening as he cuts himself off, swallowing hard. Oliver closes his eyes as Felicity's hands start shaking, the implication of what he was about to say hitting her. It's hitting him too, just as hard… and she almost asks him to continue, but he stopped for a reason.

It's too early, way too early, but she *knows*, just as surely as he does.

Her heart's racing as he continues.

"I love this future," he says, his eyes shiny with unshed tears, "I love this family that we create. And I want it so *badly* it makes my chest hurt. But she deserves better than a father who denies she's his."

No.

It hits her like a Mack truck slamming into her chest: *no*.

Felicity shakes her head - because *no*, no, he can't be actually saying this, actually *believing* it - and she steps towards him but he holds his hand up to ward her off. That only pisses her off more.

"And you deserve a partner who can offer you more than that," Oliver finishes, and he sounds so sad, so resigned, that she *snaps*.

"No," Felicity says. *Loudly*. He jerks as her voice carries through the room, like she'd just slammed a door in his face. His brow furrows as she closes the distance between them. "Just *stop*. You're *wrong*."

"No," he counters softly, so softly because he *believes* it, "I'm not."

"You *are*," Felicity replies, invading his space before he can get away. He closes his eyes again, like he can't look at her, shaking his head to ward her off, but she doesn't let him. Felicity's hands come up, one cupping the side of his neck, the other resting right over his heart. It's pounding, and his skin is so warm, nearly scalding. "Look at me."

"Felicity…"

"Look at me, Oliver," she demands and his eyes instantly snap open. "We will never have the kind of life that is safe, because of the choices we've made."

He moves to argue but she cuts him off this time.

"Our lives have *meaning*." She stares at him, and it's her turn to beg him to see what she's feeling, what she's trying to tell him. "We make a *difference*. And yes… *yes*, I will worry about her safety every single day of my life. I know I will, because I love her too. I love her more than anything else I will ever love in my entire life."

Oliver's breathing is uneven, his lips trembling, but his gaze never wavers.

"But… she gets to see that her life can be so much more than routine, that she can have an impact, make the world better. And that's so… *amazing*, that we can give that to her. We can't just accept this notion that it can't happen because something bad might take it all away one day. We're not the sort of people that settle just because there's risk, Oliver. If I'd taken the easy route with my life, I'd be a cocktail waitress in Vegas like my mother. I never would have gone to college, and I never would have moved a thousand miles away to work at

Queen Consolidated… and I never would have believed some crazy guy in a hood when he told me I could be more than just some IT girl."

He cracks a tiny smile, his head bowing against the memory, and she dips her head to catch his eye again.

"I'd never have gotten the chance to meet you, to have a life with you… and to have her." He makes a tiny sound that she barely catches and Felicity tightens her hold on his neck for emphasis. "None of that would've happened if we'd just accepted that we can't have it all. That's not who you are, Oliver. And that's not who I am. We're the kind of people who fight with every breath we have to make the world better. It's not safe. And it's not easy, but nothing worthwhile really is. And that world we're fighting for, Oliver? That's the world my daughter deserves to live in, the world *our* daughter deserves to live in."

"Felicity," he sighs, her name unsteady on his lips as he closes his eyes.

He's still not convinced, which is fine because she's nowhere near done.

"She deserves a father who loves her so much he'd do absolutely anything to protect her *and* this city, a father who builds pillow forts with her and plays with her in a fairy castle and wipes her nose when she cries. That's what I want for my daughter, Oliver." He looks at her, his eyes wet with tears and the sight of them makes her own surge to the surface. Felicity smiles, stepping closer, curling her fingers over his heart. "She deserves *you*. And I know you don't believe it, Oliver, but… you deserve her too."

Oliver's eyes slam shut at that and Felicity fights the urge to ask him to open them again. For a long moment, he doesn't do anything, or say anything. He barely breathes. But as the seconds tick by, she can feel the fine tremble where she's touching him, she can feel his muscles flex when he tightens his hands…

With a deep breath, Oliver finally moves, his hands coming up to her waist. Felicity's breath catches at the familiarity, her heart taking off as he slips them around her, holding her tightly. She watches him watch his hands as he touches her, like he's making sure she's real, like what she's *saying* is real, before they finally land on her hips.

She's not sure who's trembling at this point.

"It was a castle," he says.

"What?" she asks, blinking, spreading her fingers out over his Bratva tattoo.

"The pillows." Oliver smiles, meeting her eye. "It was a castle, not a fort."

It takes her a second to catch up, to realize what he's saying, and when she does, Felicity huffs out a little laugh. And then she nods.

"Well, she deserves a dad who knows that." He looks down, almost bashful, and she has to bite her lip as the sight of him doing that tugs at her heart. It's so oddly *cute* and it makes her chest feel full. "Oliver… telling people you aren't her father doesn't make it true." That makes him stiffen and she shakes her head, because it means *nothing*. "You are an incredible dad. You took to Ellie so fast, and so fully, it's… it takes my breath away to watch. Nothing you say tomorrow is going to change that you're her dad, Oliver, *nothing*. She will never doubt that, we'll never let her. And nothing you say tomorrow will change that I want this too." The growing light in his eyes takes her breath away. "And not just for her, but for me too. So, *so* much."

"Felicity," he breathes.

Oliver tugs her closer, pressing his forehead to hers as she shivers at the way he draws her name out.

Fe-li-ci-ty.

He slides his hands up her sides, his fingers dancing over her ribs, and she's ridiculously aware of them as she takes a deep breath. He's warm and it's only when he's holding her like this, surrounding her and letting her in, that she feels it seep into her, warming her from the inside out.

This is it.

He's it.

"I think I was head-over-heels for you from about thirty seconds after we met," Felicity murmurs, her nose brushing against his. "But it's so much more now, so much more, because… Oliver, every day… every day I spend with you, I fall in love with you a little bit more. I didn't even know I could."

He takes a stuttering breath, echoing the way her heart skips a beat as he pulls back to look at her.

Felicity looks at him, barely blinking, and the vulnerability that's slowly filling her reflects back at her in his eyes. He'd almost said it earlier, she knows he almost said it… but he'd stopped. And that has her stopping.

Until she sees hope slowly filling his eyes, until she feels that he's holding his breath, like he's not sure he's hearing things correctly.

She's speaking before she can stop herself.

"Knowing you has changed my life," Felicity whispers. "It changes it every day, makes it better, in ways I didn't even know was possible. Not until I met you. And knowing I get you, and that we have Ellie…" She takes a breath. "Oliver, I don't want this to be because of everything that's happened, because so much happened so, so fast, but I can't… I need you to know that I want this. I want you, because… because I love you."

Oliver's face opens up at that, surprise and hope and *love* shining back at her, and she laughs a little, shaking her head.

"I love you. I think I have for a really, really long time, and…"

"*God*, I love you too," Oliver exhales with a rush of emotion, the words so intense and so full of feeling that she *feels* them in her own bones as his hands come up to cup her face.

"Yeah?" she asks, even though she *knows*. His hands are shaking again, his thumbs brushing over her cheeks, and he's staring at her like… like… like she just handed him the key to *everything*.

It's *a lot*… but she wants it. She wants it all.

"Yeah," he whispers, nodding, leaning forward until his lips are brushing hers. His stubble scrapes against her, deliciously soft, his breath coming out in tiny pants. His skin breaks out in goosebumps that she can feel under her fingertips and she steps closer until she's pressed fully against him, cupping the back of his neck. "Yeah."

"Oliver," she breathes, pushing herself up on her toes to get closer to him, but he holds back, like he's savoring it, and it's just enough to make her whisper, "I'm pretty sure this is the part where you kiss me."

He chuckles, the smile staying on his lips as he does just that.

She meets him halfway.

The instant his lips touch hers, the rest of the world slips away, leaving nothing but them, in a haze of love and peace and warmth and *home*.

The kiss stays soft, gentle, his hands cradling her close, and it brings tears to her eyes how *precious* she feels in that moment. She feels cherished and loved… like as long as they have each other, they can do anything.

It's intoxicating and terrifying and amazing all at the same time, making her knees actually feel weak in a surge of adrenaline that has her holding him tighter. But before she can catch up with the flutter of emotions filling her, before she can fully contemplate what she's feeling, she wants *more*.

She *needs* more. This isn't just want. It's more than that. It's denied attraction rearing its head. It's *years* of pushing her feelings down, not letting them control her. It's telling herself over and over that all of those feelings were one-sided and that one day the dreams would stop, the thoughts would stop, her feelings would go away… It's realizing now that it's more, that it's always been more, and that she wants it all, she wants this future with Oliver and she will do *anything* to have it.

It fills her up, fills every fiber of her being, and she's helpless against it.

The need crackles under her skin, suddenly sparking to life in a way that has her moaning, kissing him harder, wrapping her arms around his neck, pressing the full length of her body against his - was he always this *huge*? He seems bigger than life when he towers over her, taking over everything. She feels like she's getting swept up in him and she wants nothing more than to dive in, to let go.

And he's *hard*, his body is an unmovable mass that melts under her touch, always under her touch… She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit that she'd noticed it before, how he reacted when she touched him, whether it was a hand graze or when she was patching up one of his wounds. He melts for *her*, this man who stands up against the strongest forces in the city, who stands between danger and innocent lives, who doesn't back down because he knows it's the right choice… It's more than she could have imagined, the way he molds himself to

her, fitting against her like they were made for each other.

It's *a lot*, and it's happening fast, really fast, but she doesn't want it to stop. She doesn't.

So she gives in. She lets him in completely.

Oliver groans, a rough, "*Felicity,*" slipping out before he drops his hands, one sliding down her neck to her shoulder, his fingers slipping under her t-shirt as the other falls down her side. Felicity shivers when he brushes over her ribs, his thumb slipping along the underside of her breast. It's so innocent but so intimate at the same time, and she moans, arching her back to press her chest against his as she pushes a hand up into his sweat-dampened hair.

Her nails scrape over his scalp, eliciting a bodily shiver from him, and she lifts a leg to get *closer* to him - the growing bulge in his pants presses against her in a way that has a desperate gasp falling from her lips as she arches into him for more. It's a living thing deep inside her, controlling everything, guiding everything, *demanding* more… and she's completely powerless against it.

And so is he, something she doesn't realize fully until he suddenly tightens his grip on her, pulling her closer, his arms wrapping around her, his hands fisting her t-shirt. The move has her shirt riding up, exposing her lower back and when his fingertips feel her naked skin, he gasps, slipping his hand underneath it. He goes all the way up, his fingers slipping under her bra, following her spine like it's the only thing they were made to do.

He's everywhere, and she's spinning, unwilling to stop kissing him to catch her breath. He feels so good, he *tastes* so good, so much better than she could have imagined. How is it possible that every single kiss only gets better, only makes her crave more?

She doesn't even feel him moving until his other hand slips around her and he grips her through her jeans, *tightly*, digging his fingers in, pushing her closer just as much as he's feeling her, and both have her heart leaping right out of her chest with anticipation and something else that makes her limbs feel weak.

Felicity pushes herself up on her toes to get closer to him, and his grip on her tightens as he moves his hips…

"Oh… *god*," she moans, struggling to breathe, pressing her forehead against his, sensation taking over. It's so much more, so much more

than she could've ever imagined…

So good, so, so good.

Don't stop…

But before she can feel anymore, before she can reciprocate, before she can hear the same noise from him, Oliver freezes. Felicity pulls back just enough to see his face, to see his eyes closed, his breathing harsh and uneven, his muscles coiled…

He looks like he's ready to snap and the reality of what they'd been heading right into without any emergency brakes on hits her.

"This is not exactly where I imagined making love to you for the first time," he says, and it takes her a second to realize he's smiling. A second after that, his words catch up with her and her mouth goes dry at how deep his voice is when he says '*making love.*'

Oliver pulls back, not letting her go, just enough to see her and the smile that lights up her face matches his.

"So you've thought about it, huh?" she asks and he chuckles.

"Once or twice," he replies cheekily. His eyes narrow, a whole new meaning in the look he's giving her, and suddenly the quiet moment turns into something heated all over again.

Felicity takes an unsteady breath and his eyes drop to her lips, darkening in a way that makes her stomach swoop. They're still wrapped around each other, her hands buried in his hair, her leg around his. His hands are still on her, one buried in her shirt, his other holding her close enough that she feels *all* of him.

A deep flush sweeps over her and she swallows.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind either," she admits breathlessly. "That's not to say this gym isn't wicked seductive. I mean, the fluorescent lights alone…"

Oliver chuckles under his breath before nodding. "We should get back upstairs."

"Yeah." Felicity swallows. "Upstairs."

It seems so far away though. Too far away.

Neither of them lets go. Oliver's lids grow heavy, his skin warming even more under her touch. She grips his hair as he slowly slides his hand further down her backside, down her curves until his fingers brush against her center.

She whimpers, her hips surging forward and his eyes slip shut as she rubs right where he needs her… right where she needs him.

"Felicity," he breathes, his voice cracking, and the sound of his own desperate need is her undoing.

They move at the same time.

His lips crash against hers, swallowing her gasp, as he yanks her against his chest, nearly lifting her off her feet. Felicity's fingers tighten in his hair as she opens for him and Oliver drops his arm, grasping her waist…

Oliver picks up her up effortlessly, their lips never losing contact, his hand slipping further between her legs for leverage, making her center clench with a need that makes her whine. Felicity winds her legs around him, pulling him flush against her, the combined heat growing between them making them both hold on harder. His mouth moves against hers, his stubble scraping when he angles his head to kiss her deeper, to kiss her harder.

The sensations washing over her are intense, heady, and she's powerless against them, completely powerless. He's a hurricane sweeping through her, turning everything inside her upside down in ways she never, ever could have imagined and it's intoxicating.

She doesn't feel him moving until he starts to lower them to the ground. He winces when he puts weight on his knee and she pulls back with a, "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he whispers roughly, his lips finding hers again, as insatiable as she is.

Oliver lays her down, holding all of her weight like it's nothing, and that alone has her stomach fluttering as he gently sets her on the ground before blanketing her body with his.

His next thrust is *perfect*, right against her center, and she breaks the kiss off with a low keen, her mouth falling open, her head falling back. She locks her ankles behind his back, using it to meet his tiny thrusts, and it doesn't matter that they're both wearing jeans, that the

sensations should be muted or painful or *something*, because she doesn't feel anything but *him*.

"Oh god," he breathes, pushing his hands into her hair, cradling her head. His cheek scrapes over hers, sending heat racing through her, right for her core, and she turns into him as he whispers, "God, Felicity…"

"Oliver," she manages before her lips find his again.

They move together, fast and hard, both lost in the pleasure blossoming between them. He's so hot where he hovers over her, pressing himself right where she needs and *god*, it feels so good, so good. Felicity's hands sprawl out over his back, holding on as she urges him closer, her hips rising to meet his. He chokes on a groan, the sound rumbling through his chest as they both rub harder.

Need surges through her veins in a white hot rush, and it only grows hotter and hotter...

Felicity breaks first.

With a sharp, "*Aah*!", pleasure explodes deep in her core, radiating out through her body in waves that leave her breathless. Her back arches off the ground, her hips moving without rhythm, her nails digging into his shoulders. He holds onto her tighter, his fingers gripping her hair as his other hand slides down her body to grip her thigh, lifting her higher, his hips moving faster.

It's amazing - *beautiful* - and it only sends her higher.

His name is a litany on her lips as he chases his own release, and she melts under him, trying to breathe, trying to hold on, every inch of her shaking. Oliver buries his face in her neck, his breath hot against her skin, and she lifts her legs higher, opening herself more…

It barely takes a few thrusts before he's falling over the edge with her, a beautifully breathless, "Felicity!" on his lips as he shudders, his hips moving mindlessly until he's spent.

Oliver barely keeps himself from collapsing on top of her, his chest digging into hers, his face pressed against her shoulder. She's just as dazed, and her eyes are heavy, so heavy.

That was…

Wow.

Felicity strokes the back of his neck, turning her face into his.

"So that just happened," she whispers.

Oliver chuckles tiredly, lifting his head to give her wet kiss.

"Yeah," he says. He kisses her again and again, his muscles trembling, before he shakes his head with a little laugh. "I feel like I'm in high school."

Felicity giggles under her breath, biting her bottom lip. "I'm glad. I mean, I'm not glad you feel like you're in high school. Or, maybe I am because that was kind of *amazing*, not that dry humping was exactly how I saw this going down… nor did I ever think I'd ever be saying that to you." He chuckles. "But I'm glad it happened. Is that weird?"

"No." Oliver says, shaking his head, knowing exactly what she's saying. "Because I am too."

"Good."

Felicity cups his face, pulling him down for a lingering kiss that she feels through her entire body, and he melts against her, the kisses slowly turning into soft, chaste pecks that fall away to Oliver leaning over her, his forehead pressed against her.

"I should clean up a bit," he whispers.

She hums, a knowing smile on her lips before nodding. "Yeah. And sleep. Sleep sounds good."

Oliver nods his agreement, kissing her one more time before he finally moves. He gets up slowly, tugging her with him. Their moves are languid and they hold on to each other as long as possible, neither really wanting to let go… but they do, readjusting clothes. Oliver grabs his shirt, pulling it back over his head, and she licks her lips as she watches him.

There's a new intimacy between them, something tentative but *real*. Warmth still radiates through her body, pleasure humming along her nerves. They don't leave room for awkward pauses, Oliver just takes her hand and tugs her towards the door.

When Felicity glances at their intertwined fingers with a quiet smile,

he does the same.

He stiffens when he sees them. His are still coated in dried blood, swollen from taking his frustrations out on the bag. She absently wonders if there's blood on the punching bag.

The withdrawn look is back and she stops, pulling on his hand to do the same.

"Hey, you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," he replies. "I'm okay."

They make their way upstairs.

Oliver keeps her close, and he wonders if she minds how tightly he's holding her hand. The shock of seeing his bloodied skin against her clean skin is just as jarring as it had been earlier, and while it'd made him want to hold her even tighter, like her presence could erase the damage he'd done to himself, it'd also shoved him right back into the very reason he'd been downstairs in the first place, eradicating the simple peace he'd felt for the last few minutes.

"*I love you."*

She loves him. *She* loves *him*.

Oliver's heart stutters at her words all over again, like he's hearing them again for the first time. And she'd said it like it was the most natural and obvious thing in the world.

She loves him.

It'd taken him a few seconds to fully realize what they'd just done. It was… he didn't even have words. And it'd been so *simple*, so easy, and with almost anyone else he would have been wondering what the hell they were thinking but with Felicity… the way she'd made him feel, how *good*, how *alive*. And after, he'd wanted to do nothing more than sink into her arms and never leave. He'd felt so relaxed, *content*… all because of her.

It was astounding - it still is - and it softens the stab in his gut when he thinks about tomorrow, about what his mother wants him to say.

"*No. Absolutely not, you can't possibly be asking me to say Ellie isn't… that she isn't mine. She is. And I won't.*"

"*Oliver…*"

"*No… no, I'm not… They can't have her. They don't get* this. *I'm not-*"

"*It's the best option and it's the safest. Think about Ellie, about Felicity, and what being connected to the Queen name right now means for them.*"

"*That's not why I'm-*"

"*It needs to be. Your focus needs to be on their safety.*"

"*Their safety is the* only *thing I care about.*"

"*Good. Then you can recognize that it's not exactly safe for them right now or - by extension - for us.*"

"*Us?*"

"*Don't look at me like that, Oliver you know that's not what I meant. This is going to cause havoc, havoc we simply cannot afford.*"

"*You mean havoc* you *can't afford.*"

"*Have you so easily forgotten about the company? Or that Isabel has very nearly taken everything from us?*"

"*No, but in comparison that's not-*"

"*Good. Then we will hold a press conference and you will explain that Ellie is Felicity's daughter, and not yours.*"

"*I can't do that. I can't… No, I can't. I won't. I already… she's* my daughter.*"*

"*You can, Oliver, and you will… because it's the best thing you can do for them. Now, explaining Felicity's role will be slightly more problematic, seeing as she was your assistant, but you can simply say… that it became more than that. You kept it professional because she worked for you but now that she doesn't, now that your work situation has changed, you're together and you're happy… Happy enough to invite her daughter into your life.*"

She'd rendered him speechless with that. He'd clenched his jaw as he went through the motions, went through every angle, every possibility… but the worst part was that it made sense, and it'd left a chalky taste in his mouth.

Felicity hadn't done much better.

"*That can't be our only option."*

"*Unfortunately, it is. It's safest, for you and for Ellie."*

"*But he's her father, if anyone looks hard enough-"*

"*They'll see a man who has taken a woman and her child into his life, as if they were his own."*

"*They are his own! I mean we, we are his."*

"*If you have another suggestion, I'm more than happy to entertain it… but I think you both know this is the only sensible route to take."*

Felicity had been gripping his arm so tightly, unconsciously mirroring his grip own on Ellie. His hand had tightened, almost like he wasn't going to let her go for anything, not for any damn thing in the world, to the point their daughter had said, "*Ow, daddy, that hurts."*

"*Sorry, Ellie-bug."*

The nickname had slipped out like it was second nature… because it was, because it is. Because that's what he calls his daughter, because that's what his mother had called Thea, and what Thea had called him.

Ellie is *his*… except now he has to tell the world she isn't.

Because her safety comes first, always.

Oliver grits his teeth.

It's not as bad as earlier, not since Felicity found him, but the disquiet is still there, and he's pretty sure it's going to be there until well after tomorrow morning when he has to get up in front of a group of strangers and tell them…

Even *thinking* it still hurts.

The feeling makes his gut sink and his mind unwittingly goes right to

when he felt like that before *this* blew up in their faces, back to the look on Thea's face earlier, which only has his chest caving in even more.

Oliver swallows, pushing it all down, squeezing Felicity's hand in his - as much for her reassurance, since the worry line appeared again between her brows, as it's for him. Her smile makes it easier… as does the scene they walk into when they reach his room.

They both pause, Oliver's jaw dropping slightly as he takes in Sara and Ellie sprawled out on the floor in front of the sofa, cushioned by a sea of pillows they'd obviously taken from his bed. Ellie's laying with her head cushioned on Sara's thigh, her little hands twisting the afghan she'd slept with that morning. They're both transfixed on the screen where The Little Mermaid is playing, although he knows without a doubt that Sara knew they were there long before they even reached the stairs.

Ellie's just oblivious.

The simple domesticity of the scene makes his heart ache - with *happiness* - and suddenly standing up and saying a few words he *knows* aren't true doesn't seem so bad.

"Hey, you two," Sara says, amusement coloring her tone as she glances at them. Her eyebrows go up and Oliver realizes he didn't even glance in the mirror downstairs. He can only imagine what his hair looks like, what their clothes look like - he didn't look at his jeans, he'd been too preoccupied with Felicity - and if his lips are as beautifully swollen as hers are… He finds he doesn't really care. He knows Sara better than anyone and he knows there aren't any hard feelings on either side. So instead of ducking his head or losing Felicity's hand, he just smiles.

He wants the people in his life to know about them, he *needs* them to know.

Felicity isn't on that same page yet though, at least as far as Sara's concerned. She tries to untwine their fingers, but he doesn't let her.

Sara's smile doesn't go anywhere as she gently untangles herself from Ellie, who barely reacts, and stands. "Maybe I should stay here and finish the movie with Ellie while you two…"

The insinuation is obvious.

"Oh no, that's not… what we did. Or, I mean… what we're doing," Felicity replies. She laughs and when Oliver glances at her with a patient smile, he knows she's uncomfortable because she ignores him completely. "That's… No."

He tugs her a little closer, much to her chagrin.

Sara chuckles, shaking her head, biting her tongue to keep more comments at bay as she approaches them.

"Your mom had a meeting with her campaign manager so she left Ellie with me," Sara says to Oliver before glancing at them both. "I hope that was okay."

"Of course," Oliver responds. "Always. Besides, there's probably nobody safer she can be with right now anyway."

Sara looks pleased, and he smiles at her - there's no one he'd rather have her with, because he knows she'd do anything to protect Ellie just by virtue of the kind of person she is.

"Ellie already brushed her teeth." Sarah glances back at the little girl. "Didn't even have to ask her."

"She's freakishly good like that, isn't she?" Felicity says, craning her head to look around Sara. Her voice is gentle, like talking about Ellie centers her. "Makes me a little concerned about how the next one will turn out."

He'd almost forgotten she's pregnant in the future. Oliver's stomach flutters as anticipation fills him… along with a little fear as the day's events come roaring back.

"The next one?" Sara asks.

"Oh…" Felicity's jaw drops, her fingers squeezing his.

He steps in, his voice cracking slightly with the weight of what the future holds for them.

"Felicity's pregnant in Ellie's time," he says, and as the words come out, as they settle in the silence around them, he can't keep the smile off his face, one that Sara mirrors.

"With a boy," Felicity interjects, almost like it's involuntary because her mouth snaps shut a second later.

"It's…" Oliver turns to her. "It's a boy?"

"Ellie told me, I guess I didn't…" she fills in, and when Oliver can only stare at her in wonder, she grins, a beautiful involuntary grin that lights up her entire face. "Surprise."

"Wow," he manages, shaking his head. A *boy*? They're having a boy? Somehow it's more real now, that she's pregnant, knowing that it's a little boy, that they're adding to their family… that Ellie will have a little brother on the way. For a second he forgets everything that's happening around him and stares at Felicity, trying to grasp the thought of a boy. Another baby. A baby boy. "Wow."

Felicity's face softens and she pinches her lips slightly, nodding. "Yeah. Wow."

Sara doesn't say anything as she steps closer to them, clasping their shoulders. She pushes up into her toes to kiss Oliver's cheek before kissing Felicity's.

"I'm happy for you guys," she says. She squeezes Oliver's shoulder for emphasis, and he knows what she's saying - '*this is everything you deserve, and I'm glad you have it.'*

"Thank you," he replies.

Felicity's voice is quiet as she says, "Thank you… that… means a lot…"

Coming from you.

Sara smiles as if she'd heard the unspoken words and nods before stepping back. "I'm gonna go do another round through the house, make sure it's locked up tight. I'll see you guys in the morning."

In the morning. The press conference. And just like that, the heavy feeling of lead is back in his stomach.

"Yeah," he responds faintly. "See you in the morning."

Sara turns back to Ellie, calling out, "Bye, munchkin," with a little wave.

"Bye," the toddler vaguely responds.

Sara chuckles. She gives Felicity and Oliver a nod before leaving, closing the door softly behind her.

The first thing he wants to do is go to his daughter, but not like he this, not with his hands chafed and bloody. They're finally starting to hurt, like Felicity's words downstairs have started sinking in.

"I'm gonna go clean up," Oliver says, pressing his lips to Felicity's temple. "I'll be right back."

"Hurry back," she whispers, leaning into his lips when he kisses her again.

And he does hurry.

The thought of being away from his family for one more second is almost unbearable all of a sudden, which is a stark contrast to earlier when he'd had to get away for fear that he might explode. He'd just needed to *hit* something, break something… *anything* that wasn't going outside and working his way through the crowd that was steadily growing at the gates to the Manor. It hadn't been the punching bag he'd seen, but every single face out there, the two assholes at Verdant…. Isabel… Slade.

It hadn't helped a single thing. If anything, it'd only pissed him off more, churning the anger and frustration and desire to do the exact opposite of what his mother was suggesting… but he knew how stupid it was, he still knows it. That knowledge didn't dampen the simmering rage in the pit of his stomach; it'd only made him hit harder.

Until Felicity.

He hadn't realized how much he'd craved her absolution, her rationality… her forgiveness. He hadn't been able to forgive himself - he still doesn't, he probably won't ever - but her clemency… he'd needed it, with a desperation that'd socked him in the gut, leaving him breathless until she'd shined her light on him.

But Felicity's right, she's so right.

He will do what he has to for Ellie, there's no doubt about that.

Still… what kind of man - what kind of *father* - denies his own child? How is that a thing that's *ever* okay?

And what will Ellie think?

God, that might haunt him more than anything else in this mess. The thought of her little face twisting in hurt and confusion, how her brow

will furrow and her eyes will beg him for answers he can't give. He doesn't want to do that to her, he *can't.* She's too young, and she won't understand *why* he has to do this… but she will understand her father saying she isn't his. That she'll get. And he wants more than anything than anything to spare her from that.

She won't be there tomorrow morning though, she won't have to hear it, and he knows Felicity won't let her watch it, for this very reason.

That doesn't make him feel any better.

Oliver washes his hands, avoids looking in the mirror, barely wincing as he scrubs the blood off his hands until the skin is pink and raw. They're bruising, and he curses under his breath - he hadn't even thought to wrap his knuckles when he'd gone downstairs. He'd been too intent to do anything but *hit*…

He dries his hands and leaves the bathroom. He sneaks into the closet, shedding his clothes, pulling on a pair of sweats and a clean t-shirt.

When he steps back out, Oliver has to blink at the sudden lack of light except for the bright glare coming off the large-screen television. Ellie's still in front of the sofa, still watching the movie, and Felicity… His heart skips a beat when he sees where she is, laid out across the foot of the bed, head propped up on hand, watching the movie as well. She's already changed into a pair of yoga pants and the large shirt from last night. It hadn't occurred to him last night to wonder if it was his.

A wave of calmness sweeps over him, settling him.

"I got in trouble," Felicity whispers.

Oliver huffs out a quiet chuckle. "Why?"

"Apparently only Aunt Sara can hang out in front of the TV," Felicity replies, and despite the darkness in the room, Oliver can hear her smile.

"Is that so?" he asks, looking at Ellie where she's laid out. He's moving before he can think twice, heading straight for her. Oliver gets down on his knees - it's easier than it was just this morning, although he still winces when he puts pressure on his injured knee - and whispers, "Hey, Ellie-bug," as he tries to settle in with her.

"No, daddy," Ellie says, pushing on his face when he gets closer to her.

She doesn't even look away from the screen as she angles her head to look around him and it's the cutest damn thing *ever,* feeling her hands pushing on him, both of them knowing he'll go anywhere she asks him to. "I'm watching a movie."

"I see that," Oliver replies. "Can I watch with you?"

"No."

It's simple, clean and so completely dismissive he has to bite his tongue to keep from laughing out loud.

Everything outside this moment, outside of this room, suddenly doesn't exist, as if it was there one second, and just gone the next.

"Oh, okay then," he says, and the amazing part is he has to force the hurt tone in his voice. "Why not?"

"That's Big Sara's spot."

"Right, of course." Oliver nods, leaning over more to see her face, partially blocking the screen, which makes her scowl. "Can I at least get a goodnight kiss?"

Ellie sighs, the sound all exasperation, and sits up just enough to give him a kiss… except she's still trying to watch the movie at the same time and ends up nearly kissing his nose. Oliver adjusts to catch it and it lands on the corner of his mouth. With a chuckle, he pulls her closer so he can press a kiss to her cheek in return.

"Daddy!" she says, squirming to get away from him. "I'm trying to watch Ariel!"

"Okay, okay," Oliver says, putting her back down, but not before kissing the top of her head. "Love you, Ellie-bug."

"Yeah, daddy," she replies distractedly.

Oliver shakes his head with a smile, feeling lighter than he has all afternoon, and pushes himself back to his feet. Getting down like he had reminds his body of the injuries Slade had inflicted on him just that morning - god, was that only a couple hours ago? It feels like an eternity.

He hobbles back to the bed.

"I think someone's a little cranky," Felicity says as Oliver climbs on the

bed, laying down behind her, his feet hanging off the edge of the mattress.

He doesn't hesitate anymore, he doesn't wait - Oliver just wraps his arm around her, propping his head up on his hand himself to see the screen as he scoots closer to her, pulling her flush against him. She makes a little noise deep in her chest as she wiggles back, pressing her lower half right against his…

"Felicity," he says, clenching his teeth as his body instantly responds. His hips surge forward, seeking more of the delicious friction he'd only gotten a few seconds of downstairs and he barely stops himself from gripping her hip to hold her right there while he feels oh so much more of her.

He's suddenly very, very aware of how thin his sweats are… and that they are definitely not alone.

"Sorry," she replies with a little smile he can hear in her voice, and he knows she's definitely *not* sorry. "I'm just getting comfortable."

Oliver exhales slowly, closing his eyes. He tells himself not to move, not to do anything because Ellie's right there and she's very much within earshot… but he can't help himself, and he doesn't want to. For the first time in a long time, he can touch Felicity how he wants to, and she welcomes it, every bit of it. That thought alone is a heady one and his hand's moving before he can tell it not to.

"Oliver…" she starts, her voice full of just as much warning as need. "We can't…"

He smiles. "I'm just getting comfortable."

Felicity snorts.

Oliver presses his hand flat against her stomach, delighting in the soft, round planes as he leans forward, pressing his face against the back of her neck. She inhales sharply, leaning into him without an ounce of hesitation, her hand coming up to cover his, but not to stop him. He takes that as his cue and slides it up, his fingertips brushing against the soft curve her breasts.

They both feel it, feel the promise in his touch, and she leans into him more, her hand covering his urging him higher… He bows his head against her, his lips finding the edge of her shoulder as they both move so slowly it hurts until he's cupping her breast.

"Felicity," he groans, barely cutting himself off before he gets too loud, before they alert Ellie. He grips her lightly, feels her hardening nipple against his palm, a shiver making it pebble even more…

She's stopped breathing, her head falling back, granting him more access, her hand still covering his, urging him to hold her tighter. He can feel her heart pounding against his palm, and it reminds him of how it'd raced that morning, when he'd pillowed his head on her. He hadn't even *thought* about this at the time, that'd been about reassurance and connection, about just knowing she was there, needing to feel her, especially with the realization that if he'd died, everything would have *changed*…

But now, now it's different. Now she's here, they're together, and she *loves* him, and he loves her. God, he loves her, so much, and he has loved her, for so long. He's just denied it…

He's done denying it.

Oliver takes a steadying breath, his body growing harder, telling himself to stop, but he doesn't want to. The same desperation he felt downstairs starts to fill him again, making his muscles coil with a need to *take* her.

He wants her. No, it's more than that, he *needs* her. He needs to feel her all around him, holding him, cradling him as he fills her, as he connects with her in a way that is… primordial, *fundamental*… and he knows what's driving it, that it's the fact that he *has* her, after all this time, but also that Ellie is here, the physical manifestation of their love, and that tomorrow…

Tomorrow.

It hits him like a ton of bricks and he freezes.

"Oliver?"

Felicity turns, wiggling until she's on her back looking up at him. The illumination from the tv casts an ethereal glow over her features, highlighting the concern there.

"I can practically hear those wheels twisting and turning in there," Felicity says, reaching up to tap his temple. He smiles but he knows it doesn't reach his eyes because she cups his cheek, her thumb following the gentle line of his lips. He expects her to reiterate what she said downstairs, but she doesn't. She bites her bottom lip instead,

cocking her head before whispering, "It's amazing."

That's not what he was expecting.

Oliver furrows his brow, asking, "What?" His lips move under her thumb, and she doesn't move it. He presses a soft kiss to it, making her smile.

"You," she replies simply, her eyes dancing over his face, and his heart skips a beat at the way she's looking at him, like she's… happy. He takes a stuttering breath as she continues, "It's not fair that you have to get up tomorrow and say all those things, because you…" She takes a deep breath. "You love with your entire heart, Oliver, you always have. And the way you've taken to Ellie, it's… I don't even know how to describe it." She smiles. "You love her *so much*."

He swallows past the lump in his throat. Her words chip away at the heaviness inside him, slowly but surely, and it disappears even more as she cuddles closer to him, cupping his face with both hands.

She is *remarkable*, his Felicity, and as she looks up at him - like he's handed *her* the key to her future, like it isn't the other way around - he lets himself fall into her, lets her be there in a way he's never let anyone else in. A rush of trepidation is quick to fill him, something pulling him back, telling him to *wait*, but he's done waiting…

She's so strong, so powerful, and she's looking at him like he's the thing she's been waiting for.

He's such a goddamn idiot for telling himself he couldn't have her, for keeping himself away from her.

"Tomorrow doesn't mean anything, Oliver, and it won't, not ever," she continues, "because I know the truth, and Ellie knows the truth. That's all that matters."

The conviction in her voice leaves him speechless. How did he get so lucky, how in the world could he ever be so lucky to have her in his life, to have her *want* to be in his life, to want to create a life with him, *together*.

"And if we're being honest," she says. "You're not exactly the *best* liar, Oliver." He chuckles, shaking his head - how can she not realize that it was *her* he could never lie to? "So if they actually believe you up there when you say you aren't Ellie's father, then they're just-"

Oliver can't help himself. Before she can get the rest of the words, his lips cover hers.

She's so warm, so soft and perfect, and she fits against him just right, just how he always knew she would.

Felicity is his sanctuary, she has been since he went to her when he was too injured to make it back to the foundry, and even before that, when he went to her for her computer skills. He *knew*, when Walter recommended her, he knew the second he stepped into her cubicle that she was someone he could go to, turn to, depend on… and it's amazing how much more she's come to mean to him, and not just in the last day.

She's *it*, the one person he turns to, the one he listens to, the person he lets in without reservation, without even realizing it. There's nobody else, and hearing the way she describes his feelings for Ellie, that she sees that and the way it affects her…

He loves her, so much, and he wants to tell the entire goddamn world. He wants to get up on that podium tomorrow and tell everyone that he has found the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with, the woman who lights his way, who guides him and who chose *him* to build a life with, to have children with. That Ellie is his daughter, and he loves her, he loves both of them…

But he can't, not yet. But someday… someday he can, and it's that realization that finally has the weight lifting off his shoulders.

Felicity moans softly under him and he kisses her more fully, wrapping his arm around her to pull her closer. They both gasp at how hard he is, how sensitive they both are… and how dangerously out of control they're spiralling.

He doesn't want to stop, he really, *really* doesn't want to stop… but the sound of Ariel and Scuttle talking in the background reminds him that their toddler is in the room.

It sobers him just enough to pull back.

She's breathing heavily, her eyes still closed. Her hands have migrated into his hair and her fingers are curled, tightening for a second - his eyes flutter shut at the sensation, his fingers digging into her in response, and he's on the verge of giving in when she lets go.

Felicity nods a little, licking her lips - and that's a bad idea, a horrible

idea on her part, because all he can see for those few seconds is her pink tongue darting out, licking right where he'd been, and he wants to taste her all the more.

"Okay," she breathes, nodding again - she won't stop nodding and he gets that, because it feels like it's for him as much as it's for her. But the way she's looking at him, how dark her eyes are behind her heavy lids… She nods. "Okay."

For a second, she doesn't move, and neither does he. They hold each other a little tighter, tension making the air practically spark between them.

He's gotten a taste, and it wasn't enough, he wants more. He wants to see her as she comes apart, hear more, feel more… but not now, definitely not now. And if he pulled her out of the room or did something idiotic like call Sara back up there to keep Ellie occupied, he knows he wouldn't be able to stop, and neither would she, and the first time he makes love to this woman isn't going to be a quickie in some random bedroom or closet or god, even the bathroom because they couldn't control themselves.

But if he could just…

Oliver groans a barely audible, "*Felicity*," before he kisses her again, just one more time, and she's right there, meeting him every inch of the way.

It's not enough and it won't be enough, but it has to be. They have time, that's the important part to remember: they have time.

He pulls back before it can go any further and lays back down, forcing his eyes to find the movie. He doesn't see it, he sees *none* of it - every ounce of his attention is on her as she lays next to him, trying to catch her breath. She's *stunning*, her mouth open in a soft pant, her hair falling out of her ponytail, her glasses slightly skewed.

Felicity whimpers, so softly he can barely hear it, and he takes a deep breath as she finally rolls onto her side to face the screen.

Oliver almost doesn't move, wondering if he can handle it, but being so close without being able to touch her is a different brand of torture he'd never experienced before. He wraps himself around her again, closing his eyes against the feeling of her soft body pressing against his, ignoring both the urge to chase after that sensation as much as ignoring her little gasp. He kisses the back of her shoulder and then

the back of her head, feeling her shiver before he props his head up, his eyes on the screen.

Slowly but surely she relaxes, her heart slowing until it's steady, and he follows her lead. They melt against each other, Felicity's hand coming up to thread her fingers through his where he has it pressed against her chest and he lays his head down, pushing his face against the back of her neck, breathing her in…

He has zero memory of the movie, barely remembers seeing the screen moving - one second he's pretty sure he's watching it and in the next the final scenes of The Little Mermaid are shattering the silence.

Oliver's eyes fly open, blinking against the harsh glare of the screen.

They fell asleep.

He pushes himself up, his feet still hanging off the edge of the bed, peeking over Felicity's shoulder to see she's fast asleep. Her face is smooshed into the blanket, her glasses half off, her arms wrapped around his where it's still holding her tight. He's *tired*, and it'd be so easy to lay back down, to give in… but another explosion from the screen and Ursula's laughter pierces through his head again. How in the world Felicity is sleeping through this…

Oliver slowly untangles himself from her, climbing off the bed. He's on autopilot, moving to pull the comforter back on her side before moving back to her, gently sliding his arms underneath her and picking her up. His shoulder twinges but it's nothing compared to the feeling of her being in his arms, especially when she snuggles into his chest, murmuring his name.

"Shh," he whispers, setting her down on her side of the bed - no pillows, he needs to grab some pillows. He pulls her glasses off and he smoothes her hair off her forehead, pressing a soft kiss there. The screen is still lighting up the room and he catches her tiny smile and he grabs her hand when she reaches for him, kissing her fingers. "I'm gonna get Ellie and turn the movie off."

"Mm… okay," Felicity says simply, so reminiscent of Ellie it makes him chuckle.

With one last kiss, he heads to where he left her watching the movie, a quiet, "Ellie?" on his lips only to find his daughter gone to the world.

His chest *aches* when he sees her all twisted around her blanket, her

head half off one of the pillows, her body sprawled out like she fell asleep in mid-run. He leans down, scooping her up, afghan and all.

She's so small in his arms, so *tiny*, and he kisses her head, warmth filling him when she scrunches her nose before burrowing her face into his shoulder. A second later, she's asleep again, dead weight against his chest as he cradles her close, turning the tv off.

He barely remembers to grab a few pillows but he does, taking them with him, narrowly missing their pillow castle as he makes his way back to the bed.

Felicity's already pulled the blanket back for him. He tosses the pillows towards the headboard before laying Ellie down. She's like a limp ragdoll and Felicity's responding chuckle is so sleepy and natural, so gorgeous it makes him laugh. She pulls the little girl closer to the middle of the bed, smoothing her wild curls out of the way as he joins them.

Before he lays down, Oliver leans over Ellie's tangle of limbs towards Felicity.

"C'mere," he whispers and with a happy hum, Felicity meets him halfway, just as they've been doing all night - it feels good, it feels *right*. Their lips meet in a lingering kiss. He smiles, kissing her again before whispering against her lips, "I love you."

He feels her bite her lip, feels her skin warming against him and he can't help but kiss her again. God, he could kiss her forever.

"I love you, too."

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for the continued out-of-this-world response to this fic. We still stop sometimes and look at each other (as much as we can with a few states separating us) and ask, "Is this for real?" Every single favorite, follow, review, kudos, comment, reblog, message, tweet, etc. means the world to us. That being said, we have noticed a trend with anonymous comments (mostly on ffn). It's completely natural and understandable that not every single person is going to enjoy our take on this fic, whether it's the amount of description in a certain chapter or that you believe we are taking too long on the plot. Whatever it is, that's cool! We respect that, because we're readers too, we know when we like something and when we don't. But the difference is we know when to walk away versus leaving unnecessary anonymous comments. We have decades of writing time between us on top of two betas who edit and look over everything we write, and while the final product that's posted isn't perfect (because there's no such thing), it's exactly what we intend to be posted. If you are no longer enjoying the story, please kindly think about exiting before leaving a couple of rude words hidden by an anon option. Thank you! Bre and So_Caffeinated

Felicity wakes first.

She *never* wakes up this early, not without an alarm clock forcing the issue. Working late into the evening - or, at times, early morning - is a habit that predates her association with Oliver by quite a bit and she's not sure she will ever fully shake the need to make up for the sleep she forgoes in favor of her nighttime habits. So when she wakes up, blinking against a single ray of way-too-early morning sunlight shining right across her eyes, she knows what the culprit is. Who in the world doesn't close the curtains when they go to sleep? That was going to be changing.

With a low groan, Felicity scrunches her face up, trying to get away

from the sun… but it's too late.

She's awake.

"I hate mornings," she whispers to herself, shaking her head, turning to bury her face back into her pillow. Except she's not using a pillow. Rather, she's not using a pillow as a pillow. She's using an Oliver as a pillow. Felicity opens her eyes, blinking at the chest she left a little drool on.

Oliver.

The day before comes rushing back, starting with Slade and then the cameras and then Thea and then the media… finding Oliver in the gym downstairs and then…

Her mouth forms a little 'o' at what happened last night and a swath of heat cuts right through her. She'd never, ever felt anything like that before, that mind-bending *need* filling her until all she could think about - all that mattered - was touching him, feeling him. They'd damn near attacked each other. A shiver falls down her spine. It'd been raw - *base* - an actual *need* in her fingers to feel more of him, to touch more, to have more…

Felicity takes a shaky breath, her heart racing. It had to be a culmination of the day's events, from the stress of what Slade had been doing before Ellie even showed.

And then Ellie…

Ellie, who isn't in bed, and who she now vaguely hears singing to herself - it's not really a song so much as random noises in a melodic tone - from inside the pillow fort.

Pillow *castle*.

The memory of Oliver reminding her of that makes her smile as she looks at him. She's never seen him sleep. In the entire time she's known him, she's never seen him like this of his own volition. Sure, she's seen him knocked out or tranquilized, but never *resting*. He's laid out on his back, his face turned towards her, one hand on his stomach, still tangled in some of her hair where it'd fallen out of her ponytail in the middle of the night. His other hand that had been curled around her is sprawled out on the mattress, loose and relaxed. *Easy*. At peace.

She doesn't want to wake him for anything.

If this is how Felicity wakes up every single morning in the future, she's pretty sure she can handle anything the world wants to throw at her. Including incredibly nosy reporters and semi-homicidal women - well, she's assuming homicidal. Isabel strikes her as being on that level.

Felicity smiles, touching his cheek softly before leaning over him, pressing a kiss to his forehead. He sighs, his hands moving like he's reaching for her before he settles again. She slips out of bed as quietly as she can, leaning down to kiss the palm of his hand before putting her glasses on and turning to her daughter. She's moving around in the fort, like she's rearranging, and it's a little shocking how *awesome* this kid is that she can wake up and let her parents sleep in, at *three*. They definitely do something right.

She lifts the sheet up and pokes her head in.

Ellie lets out a little shriek that slices through the calm morning air, jumping with a giggle and a, "Momma monster!"

A bolt of panic hits her and Felicity's instantly on her knees, crawling into the fort, a finger to her lips as she whispers, "Shhh!" She reaches Ellie, who's still giggling, and scoops her up into her lap. "Keep it down, crazy girl. Daddy's still sleeping."

"Oooh," Ellie replies, the word dying in a whisper as she pinches her lips together. Felicity smooths down her crazy bed hair as she asks, "Is daddy sick?"

The innocent question almost catches her off guard.

"Uh, no, he's okay. He's just really tired," Felicity says. "So, we should be really quiet, okay?"

"Okay," Ellie says with a definitive nod, far more agreeable than she was the night before.

Felicity glances around to see what she'd been up to and sees that she'd found the box of toys Raisa had set out for her. She's *nested*. The realization warms her chest, both because it's so cute but also because she's *comfortable*. She isn't in her own time, but she's making the best of it. It's amazingly optimistic.

"Momma, I'm hungry."

"Me too," Felicity admits. "Should we go see what's downstairs?"

Ellie nods with a chipper, "Yeah!"

Of course, the place Slade had attacked them is the place where the food lives. Although judging by the way it'd looked last night, Moira had to have a magic wand stashed on her person somewhere because when Felicity had glanced in there during dinner, it'd looked like nothing had ever happened. Which only made it *creepier*. And like the freakish little Queen she was, Ellie had run in there after Oliver when he'd taken the dirty dishes in like nothing traumatizing had happened at all.

Kids were like rubber, it seemed, things bouncing off of them like crazy. She was pretty sure hers was made of super rubber because if she'd seen any of *that* when she'd been younger, she'd be needing therapy.

Oh god, what if Ellie needs therapy when she's older because of what's already happened to her here?

That's a cheerful thought.

"Do you need to go to the bathroom?" Felicity asks as they climb out of the tent - no, *castle*.

Ellie shakes her head. "I already went."

"Okay, well, hold on while I go, okay?"

Felicity's in and out in the blink of an eye, reaching a hand out to Ellie who takes it with flourish. She glances back at the bed to see Oliver hasn't budged an inch, his breathing still deep and even. It occurs to her that if she woke up and the room was empty, she'd probably freak out a little bit.

Oliver might turn the room upside down.

"Hold on, Ellie-bug," Felicity says, leaving her by the door. She grabs a sticky note from his desk, pausing when she sees them - they're multi-colored and shaped like animals. She raises an eyebrow. They're a shock of color in the sensible sparse space, not something she'd ever expect to see on his desk…

Probably because they're *hers*. From the office. Felicity's heart skips a beat. When had he taken them?

A heady emotion fills her chest as she scribbles a quick, '*Downstairs,*'

on it before moving back to the bed. Ellie follows with avid interest, standing on her toes to watch as Felicity leans over and puts the bright blue sticky note right on his forehead.

Ellie giggles. "He looks silly."

Felicity nods with her own giggle. "He does, doesn't he?" She swoops down, picking Ellie up. "Let's go get some breakfast."

"And coffee!" Ellie says, her voice carrying through the room.

Felicity looks back long enough to see that Oliver hasn't stirred before she shuts the door.

"Oh, there will be coffee," Felicity agrees, throwing her fist in the air, which Ellie mimics as they make their way down the hall. "All the coffee!"

"All the coffee!"

Felicity almost goes to the front window to see if the reporters are still outside - it was honestly shocking how large the crowd had grown the night before, like what exactly were they expecting to catch a picture of from so far away? - but she ignores the urge, instead heading straight for the kitchen.

She's painfully aware of the cameras, her mind automatically cataloguing them as she walks through the house, knowing exactly where each one is.

There isn't one in the kitchen, thank the Google gods.

"So what's for breakfast?" Felicity asks, her mind flipping through the very limited array of things she can make without burning or rendering *completely* inedible. "How about some nice, yummy toast!"

"Can we have daddy's waffles?"

"Daddy's asleep, baby, remember?"

"But we didn't get them yesterday."

Felicity's breath catches at that - right, *Slade* - and she nods. "How about we ask daddy to get up extra early tomorrow and make them? How does that sound? With *extra* strawberries."

"Like… *twenty* strawberries?" Ellie asks as Felicity pushes through the

door into the kitchen. "Or a hundred?"

"A hundred strawberries? Wow, you are as ambitious as your father," Felicity says, shaking her head, tweaking Ellie's nose. "If you think you can eat…"

They aren't alone.

She smells food cooking and coffee brewing first, followed by the clink of silverware on a plate. Felicity stops dead in her tracks, looking up, ready to apologize to Moira Queen - already knowing before the words come out how *ridiculous* that is, but she can't help it - when she sees it's not her at all.

Sara smiles at them from where she's sitting at the bar, a newspaper open before her.

"Big Sara!" Ellie exclaims, wiggling in Felicity's arms to be let down, so much that Felicity doesn't have much choice in the matter and has to let go before her daughter nosedives straight for the floor.

"Good morning," Sara says, a smile on her lips. She watches Ellie run over and climb up on the stool next to her. "Hi there, munchkin."

"Hi," Ellie replies. When she sees the plate of eggs in front of Sara, her eyes widen, matching the wonder in her voice. "You made eggs."

"I sure did. Do you want some?"

"Can I?" she asks, her eyes flying to Felicity.

A wild thought flits through Felicity's head: is there etiquette when it comes to her boyfriend's ex-girlfriend's eggs?

Boyfriend.

Whoa.

"Is that… okay?" Felicity asks Sara, who cocks her head slightly as she looks at her. She knows she's being weird, she *knows* it, but she can't *help* it. Her stomach still clenches uncomfortably under her knowing eyes, especially because she and Oliver had just been a thing, not even that long ago.

It's *weird.*

"It's more than okay," Sara says. "I made way too much anyway." She

glances at Ellie. "I'm lucky you guys came down when you did, otherwise I'd be eating eggs for days."

"That's *a lot* of eggs," Ellie says before nodding solemnly. "You'd have a tummy ache."

Sara chuckles.

Felicity scoops two plates worth of eggs - Sara wasn't lying, she'd made *a lot* - and carries them over to the bar. Ellie's face lights up when she gets her very own plate and when Felicity hands her a fork, she picks it up delicately. The Queens don't do things halfway - the fork is heavy and Ellie has to hold it awkwardly to keep it from slipping out of her grasp, but she manages. Felicity takes the next barstool, nodding her thanks when Sara slides her part of the paper.

"Is the captain here?" Ellie asks. She looks at Felicity, who just blinks - who now? - and continues, as if this is all the explanation she'll ever need. "He's very silly. He calls me kiddo, like, '*Kiddoooo.*' And he makes me ice castles. Like Elsa's! It's very fun."

The captain? Kiddo? *Ice castles?* Felicity furrows her brow at Sara in question, but she just shrugs. Ah, it was future fun facts time it seemed.

"No," Sara replies, shaking her head. "He's not here, munchkin. Just me."

"Oh," Ellie says, picking up a piece of egg with her fork. "Can he come next time?"

"Uh… sure," Sara says. "I'll be sure to ask him."

"Good."

They both watch her as Ellie starts slowly eating her breakfast, swinging her feet, the movement making the few curls that aren't a total tangled mess bounce. Sara's brow is furrowed as she stares at Ellie, her face unreadable. It isn't entirely out of the norm, except now there is something more… *wistful* there.

The words are out before Felicity can stop them.

"Is it weird?"

Sara shakes her head, her eyes never leaving Ellie.

"No, it's just… the way she was looking at me when she first got here," she explains, misreading her question, and Felicity realizes she wasn't exactly *specific*. Sara shrugs, but Felicity can see the assumptions she must have made coloring her face. "I wasn't sure she knew who I was. But then last night she asked me if I brought bad guys with me, like I always do."

Felicity's heart lurches, remembering Ellie's words: "*I like Big Sara, but I don't like when she comes 'cause it's always badness."*

"Seems like future me gets into a lot of fun," Sara finishes with a tight smile.

Felicity offers her own smile. "She was talking about you yesterday."

Sara looks at her, her eyebrows going up, her face lighting up in a way Felicity's pretty sure she doesn't even realize is happening. "She was?"

"Yeah. 'Big Sara.'"

"Big Sara," she repeats, drawing the name out. The way her smile grows tells Felicity she likes it. "I assume that means there's a Little Sara running around somewhere?"

"Yes," Felicity responds, "although not like *your* Little Sara. You don't have a Little Sara, or maybe you do, I don't know, but… No. John and Lyla's Sara. They have a Sara."

"No kidding," Sara says with a little laugh. "Well, good for them. Good name choice."

"Yeah." Felicity smiles, reaching out to brush some hair off Ellie's forehead. "I guess she and Ellie are close." She bites her lip, pushing her eggs around. "That's… not exactly what I was asking."

A tiny smile pulls at Sara's lips, and a rush of foolishness fills Felicity. She knew exactly what she was asking.

"You meant you and Ollie?" She doesn't give Felicity the chance to respond as she nods. "It was surprising, but only in the way that a guy in a red suit can run through time and he also happens to carry toddlers like little stowaways."

That is *nothing* close to what she was expecting to hear.

"I've been places," Sara says, "and I've seen some very interesting

things, but this definitely takes the cake. So far, at least."

"Well… I meant-"

"It wasn't surprising," Sara interrupts, and Felicity meets her gaze. It's steady, her eyes clear. "I mean, yeah, I didn't think it would be something like this that made it finally happen, but…" She shakes her head. "No, not surprising."

"Really?" Felicity asks. "I mean, I'm not saying it's a bad thing, or a good thing even, or… I'm just… Oliver… you guys were…"

"Placeholders," Sara fills in. "Ollie and I… we weren't meant to last. I think we both knew I couldn't give him what he needed."

"What he… what he needed?" Felicity repeats, her heart climbing up her throat.

"There's a light in him," Sara says. "It's… real. It's something that makes him a hero."

Felicity smiles at that.

"And I've never seen it shine as brightly as it does when he's around you."

Her heart stops.

"Ollie gravitates to you, like a magnet, and he doesn't even realize he's doing it."

Sara's smile is serene, her voice full of wonder… and her words from last night come back: "*I'm happy for you guys."* She *is*. She's happy for him, for them, happy he's found something she couldn't give him.

The anxiety finally starts to dissipate.

"You bring it out in him," Sara continues. "You help him be better, help him become the person he wants to be. I can't do that for him any more than he can do that for me. We're too much alike for that."

"So no, it wasn't surprising. Oliver deserves this life." As if on cue, Ellie shifts, her little lip disappearing into her mouth as she concentrates on collecting every bit of scrambled egg on her plate. Sara smiles down at her before looking at Felicity again. "It's the life only you can give him, Felicity. And that makes me happy."

A soft smile tugs at Felicity's lips, and when Sara sees it, she nods, and just like that, things are okay.

Oliver chooses that exact moment to enter the kitchen and as all three women look up at him, Felicity has to wonder how much of that he heard.

"Daddy!" Ellie greets, her face breaking out in a giant grin as he approaches them.

"Good morning," he says, walking around until he's behind Ellie, who he picks up, making her squeal in delight before taking her seat, settling her in his lap. He leans over to Felicity, his face drawn in a sleepy but content smile and she's moving in to meet him halfway without a second thought, like only they exist, like they've done this a hundred times before already. They share a quick, chaste kiss, and it's just as much a good morning as it's a reminder of what they shared the night before. "Thank you for the note."

"Of course." Felicity raises an eyebrow. "We do need to talk about this stealing my sticky notes thing though. I was particularly fond of the monkey ones and they disappeared awfully fast. Now I have a solid theory as to *why*."

He gives her a look that has her stomach plummeting before winking - he *winks* at her - and then he leans back.

When he looks at Sara, they share a look, one full of meaning, meaning Felicity can't ever hope to fully grasp… and gratitude.

Sara rolls her eyes, shaking her head as she whispers, "Eavesdropper."

Oliver chuckles, his voice still roughened with sleep, holding Ellie closer. "Thank you."

Sara just raises an eyebrow with a knowing look.

"Big Sara made eggs, daddy," Ellie says, pulling his attention back to her. "They were *really* good."

"She did, huh?" Oliver asks, looking at Ellie's empty plate. His face melts into a faux-offended look as he leans over, making a show of inspecting her plate. "Did you eat them all?"

"No," Ellie replies with a giggle.

"But I don't see any eggs," Oliver says. He tickles her, making her giggle even more. "You ate all the eggs."

"No, I didn't!" Ellie giggles, shoving on his hands, squirming to get away. "No! Daddy, there's *tons*, go look!" Her laughter echoes through the room, making them all grin and laugh along. It's impossible not to, Felicity realizes - she's an actual ball of sunshine, their daughter, and Oliver is just as addicted as she is. "Momma, make him stop!"

But her words are halfhearted at best. It's clear she utterly adores being the center of her father's attention as she laughs and smiles up at him without a care in the world, wriggling closer instead of further away. Nothing in the world could make Felicity interrupt the quiet, perfect bonding moment. They'll be few and far between today and she's not sure which of them will need it more.

There's a glint of mischievousness that lights up Ellie's eyes as she goes from tugging at her father's fingers to sticking her little hands under his arms, trying to tickle him back. It's *ridiculous*, and it has Felicity laughing even harder as the little girl tries to get him to crack under the pressure. It's made even better because Ellie clearly hasn't yet grasped the subtlety of tickling and just digs her fingers into her father's armpits as hard as she can.

He laughs anyhow, more at her attempting to turn the tables on him than anything else, she's sure, but it's beautiful nonetheless.

Felicity thinks she'd like to see him laugh like that every day for the rest of her life. If she's lucky, she just might get to. The reality of that warms something deep inside her chest; it makes her heart feel light, her whole world seem a little brighter.

"Okay, Ellie-bug," Oliver announces, his laughter still shining through his voice. "You win, baby girl. You got me."

A smile of tremendous satisfaction lights up her face and she drops her hands, snuggling into her father's chest. She rests her cheek against him like he's her pillow - he is - and she looks up at him, adoration shining from her eyes.

"It's 'cause you taught me, daddy," she tells him sagely, sharing the credit. "Even if you don't 'member it right now."

"For me it hasn't happened yet," he reminds her, running his fingers through her curls. The sight of this giant man being so incredibly gentle tugs at something deep in Felicity's chest as he works out some

of the snarls in her hair. "Remember? You came back in time?"

"Oh… I guess," she says, shrugging one tiny shoulder. It doesn't make sense to her, not really. It can't. Honestly, it barely makes sense to Felicity and she's beyond the term 'well-educated.' Ellie's not done as she snuggles closer. "It'll be fun when you teach me, daddy. I promise. You're a very good teacher and the bestest daddy ever. You'll see."

Felicity bites her lip to keep herself from making a sound, and the sudden burst of love that sparks in her chest is nothing compared to the look on Oliver's face as he stares down at his daughter, hanging on her every word. He *needs* this, needs his daughter's easy acceptance and love of him more than anything else to get him through today, more than he needs her, even. He needs *Ellie* telling him how great her life is because of him, he needs her showing him over and over again that she loves him, that he's a wonderful father, and he needs to *believe* it.

And for this tiny moment, she thinks he does. Because *she* does.

Oliver's arms curl around Ellie, making her seem even smaller as she settles in his embrace like there's nowhere else in the world she'd rather be. He breathes out, a long, slow exhale that seems to carry the tension living in his body along with it before he dips his head to press his lips to her hair. He breathes her in, savoring the moment of closeness.

Felicity lets out a tremulous breath herself as Ellie does something for him that nobody else on this planet ever could, something she's been doing ever since Barry brought her back. Slowly but surely Ellie's filling in the cracks that have splintered his heart, shattered his sense of self-worth, letting the damage from all those years of brutal trauma fade away. Breakfast is forgotten as something far more sustainable fills him, fills his soul, fills parts of him that were positively *famished*.

It's powerful and beautiful and Felicity can't believe she takes part in creating this for him.

Tears blur her vision, and wow, it's way too early to be blubbering.

Oliver glances at her like he knows exactly what she's thinking and she gives him a smile, one he returns. Felicity's not sure how much time passes, but she's pretty sure it won't ever be enough.

Ellie tucks her head under his chin, doing her level best to wrap her small arms around him. They barely make it halfway. She's so *small* in

his arms and Felicity can't help but wonder what it will look like when Ellie's just born, when she's brand new to the world and tiny enough to fit along the length of his forearm. The very notion of her being that small, that fragile in the safety of Oliver's protective embrace… well, it's more than enough to send a flash of blinding want through her veins.

It's suddenly blatantly clear to her exactly why they choose to have more than one child.

After a moment, he asks, "What time is it?"

"Ah, it's, uh… " Felicity clears her throat, forcing her mind back to the present. She glances at her phone. "It's just after eight."

She can hear his unspoken questions as blatantly as if he'd spoken them out loud - *How long can I keep this? How long can I hold her? How long is she mine?* The very notion that he has to ask these things, even in his mind... that guts her a bit. But the press conference is an inevitability at this point and there's no way around it.

"We've still got a few hours."

He closes his eyes, nodding.

"Okay," he says in a quiet voice she would never have associated with Oliver before today.

One of his hands buries itself in Ellie's curls, the other wrapping around her little body tightly - his bicep is damned near the same size as her torso. His thumb strokes against her back like he's trying to prove to himself that she's *there*, that she's *real* and *his*.

She *is* his, she'll always be his.

For one long moment, Felicity thinks about leaving, just the three of them. They could run off to Central City or Ivytown or National City or goddamned *Smallville*. She doesn't care as long as they get to keep this. But she knows they can't. She'd meant what she'd said last night - she wants a life with meaning, and not just for herself but for Ellie as well. And sometimes - most of the time - that means not taking the easy route, not running away just because it's *safe*, or easy.

Felicity would do almost anything to keep the smile on Oliver's face that had been there when he'd walked into the room, but she can't give up on who they are, what they've done. Neither of them can.

In the least-murderous use of her League of Assassin training ever, Sara has somehow crossed the room unnoticed, made a plate of eggs, fruit and toast for Oliver and come back to slide it across the counter to him.

"Thanks," he tells her, without loosening his grip on Ellie in the least.

"No problem," Sara says with a knowing look before her gaze drifts down to Ellie, curled up happily against her father. "You get enough to eat, munchkin?"

"Yup," Ellie confirms, nodding, not pulling away from Oliver in the least. "My belly's all full now."

"Good," Sara smiles, looking back up to Oliver. "Tabasco?"

"Please," he confirms.

Felicity wrinkles her nose. She's about to question his taste - because *ew* - when her phone rings, vibrating on the countertop in front of her. The bright smiling face staring back at her quickly derails any thought she might've had about questionable food choices. Okay, *yeah*, this was not an eventuality she'd planned for, as inevitable as it suddenly seems.

Frak.

She declines the call, turning her phone face-down as Oliver asks, "Is something wrong?"

"Not at the moment," Felicity proclaims, giving him a bright smile, one she knows he sees right through when he frowns.

"Was that Gramma?" Ellie asks, perking up, her eyes on the phone. *Double frak*, she saw her picture. "I wanna talk to her and Pop-Pop! Can they come over?"

"You want to talk to *who* now?" Felicity asks.

"Gramma and Pop-Pop," Ellie repeats, confusion slowly filling her little features at the confusion mirrored back at her on Felicity's. "Can they come over? I wanna wear Gramma's sparkly things and Pop-Pop sneaks me candy. I like candy. He says it makes me hyper and daddy deserves that."

Silence is her only answer and Ellie cocks her head before looking up

at Oliver.

"Are they coming over, daddy?"

There is, quite frankly, a total absence of words in Felicity's vocabulary at the moment, because as much as Ellie's words might make sense they also *do not make sense*. She can't remember the last time her mother had a boyfriend worth mentioning. The very notion of her having someone in her life that Ellie considers another grandparent is… it's…

She doesn't have *words*.

"Not today," Oliver says, jumping in when Felicity can only stare at her with her jaw hanging open. When Ellie's face transforms into a pout, he pushes on, "We've got a busy day, Ellie-bug, remember? I have to go talk to the reporters in a bit, so we can get them to leave you alone."

"Oh," Ellie says, nodding. She furrows her little brow and it's evident she doesn't exactly grasp what Oliver is saying. Still, her nod turns definitive and she looks up at him with a self-assured, "Right."

It's *painfully* cute.

Oliver must think so too because he huffs out little chuckle, shaking his head. He kisses her forehead, brushing her curls back.

"I love you, Ellie-bug."

The words come out so naturally, so perfectly, but their meaning doesn't escape either of them. They're *heavy*, a revelation - for Oliver, they're new, they're so incredibly special and meaningful... but for Ellie, it's just an everyday thing. It's a simple fact in her mind: she knows he loves her and she returns it in full.

"Love you too, daddy." Ellie beams at him before turning to pluck a piece of fruit off his plate. "Can I have your orange?"

"Of course," Oliver replies with a smile. Felicity's pretty certain that, in this moment at least, he'd give her anything in the entire world if she asked for it.

Sara suddenly looks up from the quiet scene and past them, her features tightening imperceptibly. Oliver doesn't notice, too entranced by Ellie shoving the orange rind into her mouth, but Felicity sees it.

"I'll be right back," Sara says. She waves the Tabasco at Oliver, whose head shoots up. "Here."

"Everything okay?" Oliver asks, taking the bottle.

"Just gonna do a sweep is all," she advises. "Sit tight. Eat your eggs."

Oliver's shoulders tighten and he sits up, holding Ellie tighter as he starts, "Sara, is there-"

"It's fine, Ollie," she interrupts patiently. "There's a car up the road. It's not past the gates, but it's heading this way. I'm just going to go check it out."

"Do you need me to-" he begins again, moving like he's about to hand Ellie off to Felicity and join her but Sara stops, raising her eyebrows at him.

"What I *need* you to do is eat your *eggs*," Sara replies. "I cooked those, and if you keep putting off eating them, I might get offended."

Oliver's face draws back tightly, but something about her tone placates him. He sits back down, pouring Tabasco on his eggs before taking a forkful and shoving it in his mouth. Sara nods in satisfaction, reaching over to ruffle Ellie's hair before she leaves.

"Take care of your dad, munchkin," she advises, to which Ellie nods solemnly, which looks slightly more ridiculous than one might expect considering she's happily sucking on a slice of orange, the rind peeking out between her lips.

Chuckling to herself, Sara strides out of the room, leaving the little family of three alone in the kitchen.

"Her hearing is completely unreal," Felicity says.

Oliver's response is to hum under his breath before dropping his fork to tug her chair closer. He leans over and presses his lips to Felicity's shoulder as he winds his arm his waist, pulling her into his side, once again completely relaxed. It hits her how much trust he places in Sara - he *knows* she'll tell him if something's wrong. Felicity turns into him, leaning her cheek against the crown of his head, the quiet intimacy between them quickly becoming addicting.

"It's a like a superpower," she continues.

"Wasn't her hearing," he tells her, his lips still pressed against her shoulder. "She was standing in the one spot in the kitchen where you can see down the hall and out a corner of the window in the den, when that door is open. She was keeping an eye on the drive the whole time she was in here." He pulls back to look at her with a quiet smile. "She's looking out for us."

"She's a good friend."

"She is, she always has been," Oliver agrees. "You two seem to be… better."

"We are," Felicity says with a smile. "I've always liked Sara, which…" She takes a deep breath. "Which made it a little harder to be around her sometimes. There were times when I thought she might replace me on the team." His brow furrows but she waves him off. "I know, I know. And I've always liked her too, which made it really hard to be upset with her about any of it. It's not like it's *her* fault that she's awesome, you know?"

The smile that settles over Oliver's face is at least as much disbelief as it is affection and he shakes his head before leaning in to kiss her softly.

"No one could ever replace you, Felicity," he tells her as they part, his gaze tracing the lines of her face. "In any possible way."

Her insides melt at his words and his appraisal. Every bit of her wants to show him precisely how much she enjoys and echoes his sentiments… but Ellie's on his lap, munching away on an orange and humming happily, and they're in *his mother's kitchen* and the world is made up of a whole lot more than just the two of them at that very moment. Still, there's a heaviness in their shared gaze that speaks volumes about how both of them wish this morning could go.

"I'm glad to hear that," she says, her voice husky. "But…" She licks her lips, earning a sharp inhale from him. "We need to have a serious talk about your Tabasco use."

Oliver laughs. "My *Tabasco* use?"

"You taste like vinegar and cayenne, Oliver," she advises.

"*Really*?" he asks, eyes skimming down her form. There's so much heat in his gaze she can *feel* it. He has the nerve to lick his lips in a way that is the complete *opposite* of what she'd just done before he lets his

eyes trail back up and catch her gaze. "I look forward to letting you know how *you* taste."

The air feels like it's sucked right out of her lungs. She can't *breathe*. The very notion of him saying that, of meaning *that* is enough to send tendrils of want spiraling through her belly with tremendous ferocity. *Oh,* this is so very much not the place for this conversation. This is a place where clothing isn't optional and that little fact is rapidly becoming a problem.

"... *Oliver*," she chokes out, locking gazes with him, shallow little breaths working their way past her lips in tiny puffs of air.

He knows what he's doing to her. He knows *exactly* what he's doing. The self-satisfied, hungry look on his face is proof-positive of that much.

"You can't tell me you don't like things a bit spicy, Felicity," he continues with a smirk has her nerves shuddering with a desire she'd only gotten a taste of last night. Little electrical impulses run up and down the entire length of her body, like she's just touched a live wire, and when his smirk morphs into a knowing smile, she has to bite her lip to keep her gasp at bay. He's going to be the death of her. "I think we both know better than that."

Ellie or not, there's no force on earth that could keep her from closing the distance between.

An inaudible whimper slips past her lips before she kisses him with a brutally raw hunger that screams promises of *later* as she cups his face, his beard biting into her palms.

He might have incited this rather blatantly, but it's her who has clear control over their kiss. Her nails scrape against the back of his neck and he practically melts against her mouth, moaning quietly as she tugs at his lower lip with her teeth. They're both keenly aware of Ellie's presence. She's still perched on Oliver's knee quietly enjoying her orange slice. This won't go further, it *can't*… And it doesn't. But, much like everything else for the past two days, the promise of the future looms heavily in front of them. Just when she didn't think it was possible to want this *more*, she does.

"Felicity," he groans out in a whisper as she lets go of his lip. He cups her cheek, pressing his forehead to hers. "*God*, you… I just…"

"Yeah," she breathes out, echoing his unspoken sentiment before he

presses a much softer, much more chaste kiss to her lips.

He runs his hand softly down the side of her face, rubbing his thumb against her cheekbone in a way that leaves her feeling cherished. *Special*. Like she's *his* in a way that hadn't seemed possible just a few days ago.

Felicity laughs in amazement, which makes him grin as she kisses him again.

"*Ahem*."

They both jolt at the cleared throat, jumping in their seats.

Oliver goes from relaxed and easy and wholly at home with his family to completely on edge and ready to protect them in a split second, his arm tightening around Ellie as his other slips around Felicity's waist… not that it's exactly needed. It's not like it's Isabel standing in the doorway to the kitchen announcing her presence. Though, if it *had* been, Felicity's pretty sure she'd have felt more certain how she ought to react.

"Uh… Laurel," Oliver manages, his eyes on her where she stands at the kitchen entrance, Sara a few steps behind her sister. He hasn't moved. Felicity wonders if that's intentional - a silent statement about his place at her side now - or if he's just frozen as she is by Laurel's presence. "What… are you doing here?"

All things considered, Oliver might be the most uncomfortable person in the room. He probably is, actually, although that's saying a lot because Felicity is pretty sure she'd rather be just about anywhere other than in the presence of Laurel Lance right now.

Laurel's eyes drop to the toddler on Oliver's lap and her face twists in a mixture of disbelief and confusion. She had to have known about Ellie - there's no other reason for her to be here - but it's clear the reality of *whatever* she thinks their situation to be hasn't fully cemented in her mind.

Felicity's stomach jumps with nervous butterflies as nobody moves, and she's suddenly painfully aware of just how close she and Oliver are.

Ellie shifting in Oliver's arms breaks the silence. Something uneasy settles over her daughter's eyes as she leans further back into Oliver before pulling the orange rind from her mouth.

"Daddy, who's she?" Ellie asks.

"I… what?" Oliver sputters, glancing back to Laurel for a second before fixing his eyes on Ellie. "That's Laurel. Sara's sister. She's my… my friend. You don't know her?"

"Nuh uh," Ellie says, shaking her head, blond curls bouncing around her like a frizzy halo as she bites her lip. "I don't know Sara's sister. She went away before I got born. Like Uncle Tommy did."

Silence reigns. All of them - *all of them* - are absolutely still. Felicity's not sure if it's the mention of Tommy or the obvious fact that Laurel isn't around in the very near future that's rendering them all speechless… it's probably a bit of both. Laurel surely doesn't have enough information to put the pieces together yet, but the rest of them…

"What?" Sara asks in a near whisper from the doorway.

Ellie doesn't get it. She's got *no clue* what's going on. But the focus of all four adults on her with shell-shocked eyes has to be unnerving.

"Did I say something bad?" she asks in a quietly anxious voice that twists something in Felicity's heart, and just like that, it doesn't matter who's there.

"No, baby," Felicity tells her, reaching out and grabbing the toddler from Oliver's lap to hold her close in comfort. "Not at all. You're just... full of surprises, is all. You didn't do anything bad. Okay? Don't worry about it."

She's hesitant to believe her mother though, that much is obvious as she searches Oliver's stricken face for some sort of agreement. Luckily, he notes her attention almost immediately.

"It's not you, Ellie-bug," he reassures her. "Don't worry about it."

The smile he offers her is forced, but it's *there*, and the kiss he leans over to press into the top of her head settles her even more.

It answers precisely none of Laurel's questions, though.

"Oliver…" she says after a moment, her eyes lingering on Ellie before snapping to her ex-boyfriend's face. "We need to talk."

In the long list of things Oliver figured he might need to deal with today - the press conference, Isabel's next move, his mother's machinations, Thea's cold shoulder - Laurel hadn't even registered. Looking back, that might have been an oversight. There was no way she was going to miss the news and this isn't exactly something she'd just let go - Ellie? *Felicity*? She's going to have questions.

A few intimately murmured words to Felicity, a kiss to Ellie's cheek and a heavy look at Sara that unnecessarily screams, "*Do not let them out of your sight,*" later and he's following his one-time girlfriend through the familiar halls of his childhood home to his father's old study. It's a path she knows as well as he does. They've walked this route countless times before, and yet, they've always ended up right back where they are now.

As he follows her, his heart still back in the kitchen with his family, he realizes just how freeing it's been having this glimpse of his future… Of Ellie. Of Felicity. Of a kind of happiness he'd never realized was real and had surely never felt entitled to call his own. Despite everything that's happened with the woman before him, some part of him had always felt like they were an eventuality, something he ought to be resigned to. But seeing a future that looks nothing like he'd once assumed… it's like he's shrugged a weight off his shoulders, like he can look at his life and *breathe*. Like he can *want* it.

"What the hell is going on, Ollie?" Laurel demands as soon as the office door shuts behind them. She rounds on him, arms crossed, her gaze unyielding. He fights the urge to back down, to cross his own arms in defense - he feels like she's put him on trial. Maybe in some ways she has.

"It's…" he hedges, his mind racing for something to say… but there's honestly no explanation he can give her that she'll buy. "It's complicated."

"That's one way to put it," she says, her eyebrows raised. She nails him with a hard look. "Now, is it complicated because you have a *three-year-old* that is literally impossible or because you're The Arrow?"

"What?" His brain completely short circuits, her words blindsiding him. "No… What?"

He has no idea what to say. There's a lot of things he'd expected Laurel to bring up - if he'd realized this confrontation was coming at all - but his nighttime activities were most definitely not amongst them and he doesn't know how to handle this. In spite of whatever their current relationship might be, there's still a whole lot of history between them and he can read her every bit as well as she can read him. He knows - without a doubt - that she's not fishing. She's not *asking* if he's The Arrow. She *knows*.

"Don't lie to me," Laurel insists, her tone brokering no arguments. "You've done enough of that already."

Oliver closes his eyes. "Laurel…"

"I can't help you if you're going to insist on lying to me," she points out and her words have his eyes snapping back to her. *Help?* She unfolds her arms in a slightly more relaxed stance that's still stiff… but he can tell she's trying. And that means more to him than he could have possibly fathomed because *this* was definitely not what he was expecting. "And right now, I'm pretty sure you need some help."

She has no idea.

The breath he releases is slow and measured, breezing past his thinned lips as he tries to find the words to respond to her. They don't come easily and it's amazing that he already knows this isn't even the hardest conversation he'll have before lunch today.

"I… honestly don't even know where to start," Oliver allows.

"Then how about I start," Laurel suggests.

The ominous silence that follows fills his ears, anticipation about what she might follow that up with thrumming in his veins.

Oliver doesn't quite trust himself to speak and instead offers a nod of agreement. It feels like an admission, a concession, and he bites his tongue to keep himself still. While the thought of telling her what's really going on doesn't make his chest tighten like it used to, it still doesn't feel right. He didn't tell her what he really did for a reason, a reason that still stands.

Part of him very much wants to hear what she has to say, but the rest of him wants this moment in time to freeze, to rewind, to take it all back and never start this whole conversation in the first place. But as fast as he can move when he needs to, he can't time travel.

He holds his breath and waits.

"Slade Wilson told me that you're the Arrow," she begins. "Weeks ago."

"Did he hurt you?" Oliver asks immediately, his entire frame tensing for a fight, one that's already come and gone, but he can't help it. Slade is gone, they'd beaten him, but he can't help the sense of responsibility he feels for Slade's actions.

"I'm fine," Laurel says, furrowing her brow at him. "He didn't do anything. But as soon as he said it, I knew it was true. I think some part of me always knew. I know you, Ollie, and when he said that… it just clicked."

Oliver closes his eyes, not against the meaning behind her words, but because some of the weight is lifted off his shoulders. He has so many secrets. Too many. Some of it's inevitable, but with Laurel knowing, his mother knowing, *Thea* knowing… it loosens the knot he hadn't even known was living in his gut.

"I'm not here to judge you, Ollie," Laurel tells him, misinterpreting the look on his face. "I want to help."

He sighs, long and deep, not just because her knowledge brings with it a strange kind of relief, but also because her offer only reminds him how overwhelming the scope of their situation is. He really wasn't lying when he said it was complicated.

"Slade was on the island," he volunteers. It feels like as good a spot to start as any and the tacit admission that she's *right* has Laurel sucking in a quick breath. She hadn't expected this, he realizes quickly. She hadn't believed he would confirm what she'd already known. Not that long ago, she might have been right. "We were friends once… allies. But things went badly. He's a very dangerous man, Laurel. Or he was. Thankfully, he's not a problem anymore."

For a split second she freezes, clearly working over what he might mean by that. The Arrow has a long history of permanently neutralizing threats, but he's not that guy anymore. Not just because of the promise he made after Tommy died, but also because it's not who he *wants* to be. But she hasn't been privy to the changes he's gone through over the last year. She doesn't know.

"He attacked us yesterday," Oliver explains.

"And you beat him?" Laurel questions, cutting off the rest of his

statement.

"Actually… my mother did," Oliver tells her, an edge of amazement still present in his tone It's still not something he can really wrap his head around.

"Your…" Laurel pauses, blinking at him in blatant shock. "Moira knows you're The Arrow too?"

"Lately it seems like everyone does," Oliver grumbles. "I'm starting to think it's the worst kept secret in Starling City."

"And… did she…" Laurel starts before her voice trails off, the intent of her statement still obvious.

"No," Oliver counters, shaking his head. "No, he's alive. We have… connections in the government. He's being held by them in a secure facility."

"We?" Laurel prods.

"We," Oliver confirms. "The team. Me, Digg. Felicity. Sara."

"Right," Laurel nods, more than a little affronted. "So everyone important in your life then?"

A disbelieving scowl colors his face.

"I didn't want you anywhere near this," he tells her. "For your own safety. And you might try to remember that you more or less waged war against The Arrow for the better part of last year."

She almost looks insulted at that. "If I'd *known* it was you-"

"If you'd known it was me you'd have happily prosecuted me," Oliver cuts her off. His voice is even, matching the calm understanding behind his words. He's not wrong.

"Oliver, I would *never* have-"

"You *would*." Oliver narrows his eyes. "Do you not remember what it was like when I first came back? Or right after Tommy died? Laurel, it was hard to tell who you hated more - me or The Arrow."

"I've never hated you, Ollie," she counters. She opens her mouth to continue but pauses, like she's gathering herself. "It would have been so much easier if I could have. But even if I had, I've been through a

few things since then too. I've struggled, and… it's changed me, just like it changed you."

While there's an undeniable thread of truth to her words, her trials and his aren't comparable. He knows this, but it doesn't bear arguing and he won't assume to understand her crucible any more than he'd expect her to understand his.

Instead, Oliver says, "It was safer to keep you away from all of this. For all of us."

"But it wasn't safer for Sara to keep her away?" Laurel asks. "Or Felicity?"

"Sara is... " He huffs in frustration as words fail him and he runs his fingers through his hair. "Sara's as much a part of this as I am. There was never a way to keep her out of it, and… that's not my story to tell, Laurel, but she's in this. The same things that made me who I am made her who she is."

A surge of tears make her eyes glassy but she blinks them away. He fights the urge to reiterate that it's not his place to explain what happened to her, anymore than it would be Sara's place to explain what happened to him.

It's an amazing change considering how everything between the three of them started in the first place.

"Fine," Laurel says. "Then what about Felicity?"

She's holding her breath, waiting for his response, and that has Oliver pausing. For a split second, he lets himself wonder… except there's nothing left to wonder about. There hasn't been, not for a long, long time. He's not sure when exactly that happened, but in this moment he knows without a doubt that what he had with Laurel is firmly in the past.

For her, though, it's still a '*what if*'. A '*maybe*'. A '*someday*'. He honestly can't remember the last time he thought of her in that light, and he feels a stab of sadness deep in his chest, for what might have been.

What he might never have gotten.

"Felicity…" His voice is soft, more than appreciating what he's saying and what it means to both of them. "She's special. I need her... in a lot of ways. In every way."

Laurel's brow knits at that, an emotion he hasn't seen in a long, long time flickering over her reserved features. He doesn't want to hurt her, he's *never* wanted to hurt her, and yet… and yet no matter what he does, he always seems to. Even without Felicity, even without a glimpse of this perfect future where he's happier than he could have ever even imagined being, that realization alone would have been enough to prove to him that he and Laurel were not something sustainable. If either one of them was going to have any hope of really being happy, their futures have always needed to be separate.

"You're in love with her," Laurel realizes.

"Yes," he confirms without hesitation, his voice lowering with an intensity that rivals his voice modulator.

She flinches, nodding. Apparently he's never going to stop hurting her… but this isn't about Laurel, not even a little.

"And you two… have a daughter?" Laurel ventures.

"That's complicated," Oliver hedges.

"Either you have a child together or you don't, Oliver," Laurel returns pointedly. "Seems pretty easy to me."

"She's from the future," Oliver tells her, the words blunt. "Apparently our future selves had her sent back in time for her own protection."

"Uh…" Laurel blinks at him with owlish eyes. "Okay, that… that is complicated. And *crazy*."

"If I hadn't been there to see her come back, I'd be exactly as disbelieving as you are," Oliver agrees. "But I was. So were Sara and Digg and Felicity. And I know I'm asking you to take a lot on faith here, Laurel, but trust me. She's from the future."

"Okay…" Laurel allows, shaking her head and pacing for a moment. "Okay, so… at some point in the future you marry Felicity and have a child?"

"I very much hope so," Oliver tells her without thinking about it. She jolts at his words, undoubtedly thinking back to when she'd once pushed him for such things only to have him pull away.

The usual well of guilt he used to feel when he'd think about that doesn't appear, because he was a different person back then… and he

stopped being that person the second he watched Sara die the first time on the Gambit.

Laurel bypasses whatever feelings that undoubtedly brings up, consciously pushing them down to focus on the problem at hand. She suddenly straightens, her shoulders pulling back as she becomes every inch the lawyer she is as she mulls over the issues before them. Oliver's suddenly struck by the notion that she's *right*. She *could* be useful to them right now.

"Well you can't exactly tell that to the press," Laurel says.

"I'm aware," Oliver replies.

"What are you going to say?" she asks, pausing in her steps to look at him and folding her arms in front of her chest again. "This has the potential to blow up in your face in so many ways."

"My mother's campaign manager worked up a statement," he says with a grimace, hating even the thought of their plan. "Essentially… we're going to say she's not mine. That she's Felicity's and basically position myself in a stepparent role in her life."

Laurel looks thoroughly unimpressed by this plan. She cocks her head, narrowing her eyes as she presses her lips together thinly, keeping her gaze trained on him.

"And when people Felicity's known for the last three or four years of her life point out she's never had a kid?" Laurel asks. "When her family sees the news? When she goes back to her own time? How are you going to explain all of those things?"

Oliver clenches his jaw. She has a point, and he hates it, mostly because he doesn't have answers for any of it. He hadn't let himself fully think about the ramifications of what they'll be walking into. He just wants it over with, because the more he lets himself think about it, the less inclined he's going to be in getting up there and telling the world Ellie is not his daughter.

"Felicity can… she can fake documents and create photos to show Ellie was in her life. Her mom is… I don't know. I guess I just hope she doesn't see the news and the rest of it…"

His heart clenches violently at the notion of Ellie leaving. It's inevitable, he knows that, they all know that. And honestly, he's a little surprised his future self hasn't torn through the timeline in his

desperation to get his daughter back. It's *him* after all. He's fallen madly in love with his daughter in a matter of days, he cannot imagine having her disappear from his life when she's been a part of it for years.

"I know you don't want to think about her leaving, I can see that much," Laurel says, her voice gentle, mirroring her featherlight touch when her hand falls on his arm. She's right, he doesn't want to think about that at all. "But you have to. What happens when she disappears all of a sudden only for you two to have a daughter who looks just like her with the *same name* a few years down the line?"

"I… I have no idea," he admits. "I can't… I have no idea, Laurel. I don't have any answers for you."

"Well, luckily for us, I do," Laurel tells him, her hand falling away. She takes a deep breath and when she exhales, he can *see* she's fully accepted the situation. And he's grateful for it. "First of all, you need to change her name."

"She's three," Oliver says. "She's not going to respond to anything else."

"Make it something similar." Laurel shrugs. "You're trying to keep her out of the public eye as much as possible anyhow, right? What's her name?"

"Ellie," Oliver tells her. He can't stop his little smile, her beautiful face surfacing in his mind's eye. It suddenly hits him how difficult the press conference might really be. "Her full name's Elizabeth."

"Does she have a middle name we could use?" Laurel asks.

"I…" Guilt rushes through him as he admits, "I have no idea."

"That's okay," Laurel reassures him. "We can work with Ellie. Call her Lily instead when you talk to the press. It's close enough that if someone overhears you call her Ellie, they might just think they heard you wrong."

"Okay. Yeah," Oliver agrees. "But… what do we do with the rest of it? Felicity's no one's definition of a public figure, but if my mother wins the mayor's race, that'll keep my family in the public eye and the press will circle back to her." He exhales, pinching his nose as the gravity of what they're wading into hits him. "God, you're right, this entire thing could blow up right in our faces."

"Moira *has* to win the mayor's race," Laurel tells him. "But we'll get to that in a minute. As far as the press is concerned, Ellie can't be Felicity's daughter either."

"Laurel…" Oliver huffs with a frustrated laugh. "I already called her my daughter in front of two reporters. How are we supposed to protect her if everyone thinks we aren't her parents?"

"Well, luckily for *you*, you happen to know someone with a whole lot of experience in family law," Laurel points out. "I have a few ideas. Families are complicated, Ollie. You're making this harder than it has to be."

He starts to ask what she means, what *exactly* she has in mind, but a commotion in the other room cuts him short.

Something crashes, glass shattering against the floor, followed by a high-pitched, terrified shriek piercing the air.

Ellie… it's *Ellie*.

And then Felicity screams his name.

He's never moved as fast as he does in the next moment in his entire life.

Blinding terror surges through him. Time becomes sluggish, his movements feeling like he's caught in slow motion as he throws open the door to the study and races down the hall. He doesn't note that Laurel is following in his wake, doesn't register his mother rushing down the stairs. None of it matters, not in this moment - his *only* thought is getting to Ellie and Felicity. In his head, it's Slade again. Or Isabel. Or any number of other adversaries from his past.

But when he barrels into the kitchen, the sight that greets him isn't what he expected, not even close.

He barely hears the combined gasps and shouts from Laurel and his mother behind him.

Ellie's safe in Felicity's arms, the pair of them backed into a corner, looking every inch as terrified as he feels. Sara's planted herself in front of them, poised for a fight that hasn't quite materialized.

Because her *opponent* hasn't quite materialized.

It's like reality is bending right in front of them, a face pressing into their world, but not quite breaking through. A grotesque mask that gives even Oliver chills leans forward, some unseen fabric of the universe keeping it from fully entering their time, their world, their home - Oliver isn't sure which.

The only part of the intruder's face that's actually visible behind the mask is his eyes… and they're fixed on Ellie. That alone has a violent need surging through Oliver to reach through *whatever* is keeping him separate from their world and break his neck. The delight and viciousness shining in his gaze sets Oliver even further on edge as Ellie's fear saturates the air.

"Go away!" Ellie sobs in hysterics, scrabbling to get as far away as possible. "Go away, Zoom! Go away! *Leave me alone, bad man.* Daddy, make him go away! Please!"

Zoom.

He's nothing like Oliver imagined. He's *worse.*

Oliver moves swiftly between them and the intruder, assuming a defensive stance at Sara's side as Felicity's frightened, "Oliver!" mixes morbidly with Ellie's shrieks of, "Make him go away!"

But he doesn't know *how*. Zoom isn't even fully *here*. He's pushing against the walls of reality like it's plastic wrap he can't quite break through. It warps the air, leaving Oliver feeling like there's nothing but surface tension separating his daughter from one of the most terrifying things he's ever seen.

For once, Oliver isn't sure what to do, what the right move is. What if he attacks and somehow… *pierces* whatever is keeping Zoom at bay? What if fighting him does more harm than good?

Ellie's little hands grab for Oliver's shirt just as one of Felicity's grabs at his side. He steps back, crowding them further into the corner, one arm flying back to cocoon them against his back.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Oliver promises, turning his head so they both hear him.

"Daddy…"

The terror staining his daughter's voice is a hundred times worse than what he heard when Slade had been holding her and that sends a river

of ice through his veins.

He doesn't know if Zoom will break through whatever barrier is keeping him from their world, but he knows full well that he will use every last breath he has to keep Ellie safe.

Zoom reaches out, his fingers pressing against the thin film separating their realities. It gives slightly under his touch. If Oliver didn't know better, he'd say the scar-like etched mouth of his mask curls into a smile as the world around him gives, *shifts* slightly, leaving him seeming ever-so-slightly more solid, more real.

He doesn't know what to do.

"Oliver…" Felicity's shaking voice whispers. She needs a reassurance she knows he doesn't have to give, not about this. With Isabel and Slade… there he knows what he's fighting. But this? He has no clue. And that is *terrifying*.

Ellie's frightened sobs are muffled, and he doesn't have to look to know that she's buried her face in Felicity's chest, shielding her eyes from Zoom's looming presence.

He's glad she's not looking right now. Because right now… right now Zoom's finger is pressing right through the walls of reality. The rest of him is fuzzy, blurred like he's not quite real, distorted by the whisper-thin slip of a divider between their worlds, but his finger… his hand… it's increasingly solid, pushing past his world and into theirs.

"Oliver…" Sara says, warning in her voice. He vaguely sees her hand from the corner of his eye, catching the light reflecting off a blade.

"I know, I see it," Oliver replies, taking a dagger from her outstretched hand.

"We got a plan?" Sara asks, sparing him a sideways look. "I don't want to mess with slicing open *whatever* that is that's keeping him away, but... It looks like it might be just a stop-gap measure."

"... It would be hard to grab Ellie if he were missing his hand," Oliver says after a moment, eyeing the hand that's progressed far enough into their world that his wrist is emerging, fingers flexing like they're testing their limits in this new reality.

"You think it's that easy if your future self felt the need to send Ellie back in time?" Sara asks skeptically.

"I think we have to *try*," Oliver snaps. "I think there's no option *but* to try."

"Fair enough," Sara responds. She eyes the hand, the sharpened claws… "On three?"

"Yeah," Oliver agrees, readying himself for a fight. "Felicity, keep Ellie's face hidden."

"Absolutely," she says immediately.

They don't even get the chance to start the countdown. Oliver's muscles are coiled, ready for a fight to the death, but Zoom's progress into their world is suddenly halted.

A blur of red closes in on the ghastly figure and it only takes Oliver an instant to realize it's Barry in pursuit of Zoom. He slows to a standstill, firmly on the other side of the barrier and tugs at Zoom's arm with one hand while throwing a punch with the other.

The look that flits across Zoom's eyes is one of fury and frustration as he's forced to pull back, to defend himself, leaving Ellie and her world behind, the film between worlds knitting shut without the press of his fingers against it.

What follows is difficult to discern. Oliver's never seen people move this fast. It's like hitting fast-forward on an action film and trying to absorb the fight that's happening. Everything is a blur of black and red, blue and yellow lightning highlighting their moves as the two adversaries rise against each other in conflict. Oliver holds his breath as he watches it all play out in a space that's paradoxically right in front of him but totally out of reach.

And then… suddenly the blur of red solidifies, on the floor with Zoom's foot pressed into his neck.

"Ollie, we need to do something!" Sara says. "If Barry loses…"

He *knows*. If Barry loses, Ellie has no way back to her own time. If Barry loses, they have no guardian to ward off Zoom as he materializes right in front of them at any point in time. If Barry loses, *they* lose.

"We need to-" Oliver starts.

But all the sudden it isn't just Barry and Zoom. There's a third person,

every bit as fast as either of the two men. She's a swirl of blonde hair and dark clothes - Oliver's almost sure it's a 'she,' anyhow, but she doesn't slow down enough for him to get a good look - and it's clear in just a few short moments that she has the upper hand against Zoom. Zoom must sense it too, because he slows down, scowls and then blinks out of existence right in front of them.

The blonde woman - and Oliver can now see that it is, in fact, a woman - grabs Barry's hand and pulls him to stand before pressing something on her sleeve.

And just like that, they disappear, just like Zoom did, leaving the distorted space in the kitchen to slowly evaporate.

"Was that… was that *you*?" Laurel asks from the doorway, looking toward Sara.

"I don't know," Sara replies, watching the distortion in front of them shrivel to a pinpoint before disappearing entirely. "Maybe? Ellie said something about me travelling through time. I didn't get a clear look."

Their speculation is far from the forefront of Oliver's mind at the moment, though. The important thing is that the danger has passed - for now - and Ellie is safe in Felicity's arms. That's his only focus. That will always be his focus.

"You're okay," Oliver says as he turns, wrapping his arms around his girls. "You're both okay. He's gone, Ellie. You're safe."

For now goes unsaid.

She whimpers and turns toward him, throwing her arms around his neck, clinging to him tightly. Oliver holds her close, breathing her in - *she's okay*. Her little body shakes with fear, and he can feel Felicity's trembling where she grips his t-shirt in tight fists.

Oliver cups Felicity's cheek, turning her face up to his.

"We're fine," he promises again. She nods, but he knows she doesn't believe, despite her trying. "I'll always do everything I can to protect both of you.

"I promise."

From Zoom. From Isabel. From the *press*.

He only hopes it's enough. On all fronts.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> We are wildly behind on replying to reviews. Sorry for that guys! We have read them all and we definitely still plan to respond to every single one. Your encouragement and support is awesome and we are so very grateful to have you all as readers.

Her hands won't stop shaking.

Felicity huffs in aggravation, focusing on unclasping the necklace.

It isn't helping that it's brand new, *brand* new, like many of the things that'd appeared in their room that morning, courtesy of one Moira Queen. The pile of goods - a small mountain, really, of neatly packaged designer clothes with no price tags attached - had been distracting, for about five seconds. When *exactly* had the Queen Matriarch found the time to buy all of them a lavish new wardrobe? She supposes she ought to be grateful, considering it's not like she'd brought anything at all with her, much less something press-appropriate, but it's still unsettling. It'd led to a firehose of questions from Felicity and shrugs from Oliver until the gravity of what had happened downstairs and what waited for them at Moira's campaign headquarters reared its ugly head again.

Moira's designer taste and lavish-but-necessary gifts were the very least of their concerns today.

They'd gotten ready in silence, one of them constantly with Ellie until all that was left were the small final touches, including this damned necklace that she's pretty sure came straight from Hades himself. It has that 'never been opened before' tightness that's challenging her trembling fingers in ways she isn't really able to handle at the moment.

"How is this…"

The quivering in her voice stops her.

Felicity closes her eyes, her hands dropping as the lack of control over her own body, her own *voice*, overwhelms her. She hears Oliver pause where he's fixing his tie behind her in the bathroom. His silence highlights the comforting sounds of Ellie where she's waiting for them

in her pillow castle and Moira's voice down the hall, echoing the quiet rush of her new bodyguard team as they sweep through the Manor.

There's no more ugly sounds of *ripping* from a hole appearing in the center of the room or the clatter of fallen utensils or sharp screams from Ellie - her beautiful Ellie, who knew *exactly* what was happening and what it prefaced - or Sara ordering them to get back.

She'd learned pretty quickly that there was a huge difference between fear of something she knew how to anticipate and fear of something she had no knowledge about. Felicity had no idea about time travel, about *holes* in time, about what someone tearing through realities to get to her child was actually like. She didn't know - couldn't know - until now. Now she knew, because she'd met Zoom's gaze. She'd seen the amusement in his eyes and she'd known with one-hundred percent certainty that there was no place, no *time* they could hide Ellie that he wouldn't find her.

Oh yes, it's a whole different kind of fear that lives inside her now and it's eating her alive.

Felicity's hands tremble even more and she bites the tip of her tongue until it hurts, listening for the sounds of something normal, the normal she'd thought she'd had a few hours ago.

Ellie isn't moving anymore.

Her eyes snap open, flying right to the tent, half-expecting to see the giant *tear in time* again and that terrifying mask pushing through, the clawed hand reaching out for her like something straight out of her nightmares. It'd almost grabbed Ellie - it'd been so close - and when Felicity and Sara had reacted, it'd *moved*, following them.

The fear leaks through her body like acid, corrosive, leaving her pitted and hollowed.

Except Ellie's perfectly fine. The sun shines through the large picture window, casting her tiny shadow against the dark gray sheet. She's sitting, her hands moving… She's safe, in a place that she's made all her own, a place that her father built with her, giving it the kind of steady foundation that only the safety of a parent can give.

She's okay.

God, it was just a couple of hours ago that she'd had to talk herself off this exact emotional cliff and here she was again. Mere *hours* later.

Felicity can't take her eyes off Ellie. She's pretty sure she won't ever again.

Some logical part of her keeps repeating that it's likely not that easy to rip a hole through time - if that's what that even was - so the chances of it happening again are relatively slim. Right? They have to be, or else Zoom would have attempted it multiple times already.

Maybe he has.

Felicity shudders, her chest tightening. What if they'd only just seen it now, what if he'd been trying the entire time Ellie's been with them? In places they couldn't see… or while they slept? She inhales sharply and it sounds like her lungs have forgotten how to work as she sees that jagged smile again, those cold black eyes on her daughter, so close he was almost *touching* her. The thought of that thing chasing Ellie through time…

A soft rustle sounds behind her just as Oliver whispers, "Hey." His hands appear over her shoulder and he wiggles his fingers. "Let me."

"What?" Felicity asks, turning her head towards him.

He leans over her, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek, his stubble grounding her in a way that sort of blows her mind before he replies, "Your necklace."

"Oh." Felicity looks down at the forgotten chain - she's holding onto it so tightly the metal is biting into her fingers. She makes a small sound in the back of her throat before lifting it up, handing it over. "Thank you."

"Of course," he replies, stepping closer.

His hands are so large and sure - *steady*.

Felicity watches him move like her life depends on it. She takes a deep breath as he sweeps her ponytail out of the way, fingers brushing against her skin, and pulls the chain back, clasping it for her. The tiny circle emblem is chilly on her chest and it makes her shiver.

He doesn't move away. Instead, Oliver brushes his thumbs over the top of her spine, in soft gentle circles, and some of the tension slides right out of her. Her shoulders drop, her eyes slipping shut and she leans into him. His chest is a hard wall against her back as his presence surrounds her - he's so *warm* and the familiar mixture of his

shampoo and what makes him *Oliver* fills her senses.

It's reassuring.

A slight tug deep in her core sends a thread of warmth through her as Oliver digs his fingers into her muscles, making her sigh, before he skims his hands down her back, winding his arms around her waist. He envelops her in his embrace, practically blanketing her with his presence, and it instantly eases the anxiety living in her chest. That warmth spreads through her, making her shiver, and she wraps her arms around his, needing to feel more of him, more of what he makes her feel… *Safe.* Like nothing can touch her.

Felicity opens her eyes, instantly finding Ellie in the tent. She doesn't have to look to know he's doing the same thing.

"I feel ridiculous," she whispers, finding his hands. She laces her fingers through his and he holds her back just as tightly. She feels the tug in the pit of her stomach again, and it spreads through her. It's amazing how the simple act of holding him makes her feel more steady. He squeezes her hands, his arms tightening around her, pulling her flush against him, and she knows she's doing the same thing for him, in her own way.

"You're not ridiculous," he whispers, resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Okay," she concedes. "Maybe not completely, but these hands of mine were rocksteady a few minutes ago when I was putting on my lipstick and now I can't even put on a necklace."

"Muscle memory," he replies quietly. He's distracted, as much as she is, she can hear it in his voice. "It's not something you really have to think about, until you think too much about it."

"Didn't think it'd be a necklace that made me think too much today."

"They can be tricky," Oliver deadpans.

"Yeah," she whispers. "Darn little boobs."

Oliver cocks his head, his chin still resting on her shoulder but angled so he can watch her from the corner of his eye. "What?"

"The, uh…" Felicity moves to wave her hand but she isn't ready to let him go yet. "The little clasp thing. You know, your boob's showing… and apparently that's something only the little jerks did in my middle

school." Her cheeks warm. "Sorry, I'm just…"

"Don't apologize," he whispers, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck. "I know."

That unnameable warmth spreads even further, filling her chest.

She believes him when he says that, believes he *does* know, he knows exactly what she does when she's scared or nervous or upset. What's happening between them is new - very, very new - but that doesn't take away from all the months they already have between them, the night after night spent together, whether it was mundane talk over the coms or comfortable silence in the foundry. He knows her. Deeply. Intimately. Just like she knows him.

Felicity sighs, leaning her head against his. "How has so much happened in just a few days?"

Oliver shakes his head, a barely audible, "I don't know," his only response.

They don't move, neither of them ready to face what's waiting for them outside their room. It doesn't even faze her that she thinks of it as 'their' room. It just is. It's become their safe spot - *her* safe spot - and it both amazes and warms her that she's so quickly associated this simple space as something she could call home.

After the portal had disappeared, their first instinct had been to come back here, to the place all three of them felt safest. Of course, it hadn't been as simple as all that. There had been questions - so many questions - from Moira and Sara and Laurel. There'd been precious few answers, though, and most of them had come from Ellie.

"*It's always like that when Zoom comes, but he usually pushes through easier,*" still sends a shiver down Felicity's spine.

"*The dark made Sara's sister go away. I dunno how. Momma didn't tell me,*" had set Sara and Laurel both on edge.

But the glimmers of the future from Ellie - as startling as they were - were just that… glimpses, the tiniest of windows into what awaits them. She's too little to offer a more comprehensive view. But she hadn't been the only one with truths to share, as it turned out.

"*Future problems aside, it's not just Zoom we have to worry about*," Laurel had reminded them. "*Look, Ollie… I know when I accused Sebastian*

Blood before I was a mess, a drunk, and everyone was right not to trust me. But now? Now, I'm sober. I'm put together. And, Oliver, I'm telling you that he has a hand in all of this. He was working with Slade and… and, I'm not sure, but I think Isabel Rochev might be involved too."

It had clicked into place then. Felicity could tell from the look on Oliver's face that he was putting the pieces together to form a larger picture. Blood, Isabel… they're Slade's plan B and plan C, pawns in his struggle to take over Starling City in every way possible and take everything away from Oliver piece-by-piece.

There's no question that it puts the revelation of Ellie's existence in a whole new light. She isn't just being used to try and sway an election, she's being used to further *Slade's* plans, even if he's not actively involved at the moment. That thought alone had been more than enough to make Felicity want to retreat back to their room, to the place where she feels safest…

Home.

Although that's not *entirely* true. She'd felt that sense of security just as soon as she'd seen Oliver run into the kitchen, when he'd put himself between his family and the danger, when he'd promised nothing would happen to them, a promise she'd known logically he couldn't keep. But he'd try; he'd do *anything* to protect her, to protect Ellie.

Oliver is her home. Even when they're at odds, even when she'd wanted to strangle him because he was damned obtuse, even when she'd been forced to sit back, powerless, watching him risk his life over and over - he was her home. The safest and happiest place in her mind is wherever he is. Their room just represents that fact.

But… is it enough? Are *they* enough? For Ellie? For her safety?

The irony of her questioning the life she and Oliver give Ellie considering what Felicity had just told him last night is not lost on her, not one bit. But the thought is there, digging its way through her flimsy defenses until all she can remember is the way Zoom had looked at Ellie - the anger, the glee that he'd found her… and the desire to end her life.

Like he can hear her thoughts, Oliver holds her a little tighter.

"How are we supposed to fight something like this?" Felicity whispers, not sure if she's talking to herself or to him. "Why would we send Ellie here, now, when we're even *less* prepared to handle someone like

Zoom? And what kind of name is that? That is a *horrible* bad guy name. It's what… cars do. They zoom down the road. You don't zoom to kill someone."

Her voice cracks on the last part.

"Although I guess *he* does," she amends, realizing what she's saying as the words come out. He wants to kill Ellie. Her voice grows thick with unshed tears, tears she refuses to let fall. She's so *done* crying, she's done with outside forces making her cry. If she's going to cry, damn it, it's going to be on her terms. And yet she wants to. Really badly. "It hadn't really hit me what the future might be like. And now, actually *seeing* it… Oliver, I'm scared thinking about a future where things are so bad with this guy that we have to send her back in time to hide her." She snorts. "A lot of good that's doing."

"She's safer here than in her own time," Oliver says. "It's harder for Zoom to find her, or to get her at least."

"But he almost did," Felicity argues, not even fighting the manic edge her voice has taken on.

"Felicity," Oliver breathes, closing his eyes.

"I know," she whispers, voice no less intense but substantially less likely to be overheard by little ears. "I know what I'm saying and that I sound like a crazy person because usually I'm the 'rah-rah we can do this' but right now, I'm-"

"C'mere," he says, cutting her off, slipping his hands out of hers to turn her around in his arms. Felicity bites her lip as he pulls her against his chest, unable to tear her eyes away from the tent, off Ellie's tiny shadow. He appears to be of the same mind, his eyes fixed on the pillow castle. Oliver cups the side of her neck, pressing a soft kiss to her temple and when he leans into her, seeking her support just as much as she needs his, her eyes flutter shut as she soaks in his presence. Felicity pushes her arm around his waist, hugging him tightly, pushing her other hand up his chest to cover his heart. His lips move against her forehead as he says, "We're going to keep her safe."

Felicity opens her mouth to say, '*I know,'* because she does know, she *knows* they'll do anything possible to keep her safe… but no sound comes out.

"We will," Oliver reiterates, maybe a little too strongly as he pulls back to look at her. He runs his thumb along her jaw, tilting her face up to

his. "Hey, look at me." When she does, concern instantly mars his features at whatever he sees and she closes her eyes again as he says, "Talk to me. Please."

The words are tumbling out before she can put them in any semblance of order.

"It's *different*," she says, opening her eyes again. "When it was just me… when it was just us. Like when *insane* things happened before, it was easier to deal with. I mean, it didn't exactly feel that way at the time, but it was, because I had a process."

"A process," he repeats slowly. She can tell he's trying to follow her train of thought, to see where she's going with this, but she's not even sure herself, and she's not stopping.

"A process. For coping. You could even capitalize the 'c' because it's *Coping*. If it wasn't a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream, it was a glass of wine - or, you know, two, or three, or *all of them* - or it was me crying myself to sleep because I was so scared or upset, or both…"

"Oh, Felicity…" His voice is strained at the picture she's painting, but it doesn't stop her.

"It was my process, Oliver. It was what I did. And it worked. It was what let me get up in the morning not feeling like I was losing my mind, and it was what let me come into work and be able to handle the things we'd done the night before, or handle that you're always out there, always risking your life, that so much is at stake every single night, and… and what I'm saying is I *handled it*, I found a way to handle it because I love what we do, I love working with you and doing these things."

"I love it, too," he whispers, his thumb drifting along her jawline.

"But…" Felicity looks back at the tent. "With Ellie, it's different. I was okay with Slade, as okay as I could be, but… it was different, because I knew we could beat him. I just *knew* it, even when Ellie… when she faded... "

His only response is a slight tightening of his fingers at the reminder of what had happened two short days ago.

"But this…" She looks back at him, and his face falls at the look on hers. She wants to tell him she's *fine*, that she's okay, but she's honestly not sure. "There is this crushing *fear* in my chest. The danger is

constant and there's no such thing as security. And, Oliver… it's *so much.*"

"I know…"

"And I'm a little jealous of our future selves right now," she continues, "because we obviously want this, you know, we choose this. We find a way of Coping, with a capital C. We're obviously far more capable and mature and not insane…" Felicity lets out an irritated sound. "I know I'm overreacting, that I'm… that I sound crazy, but this just happened so fast, and now we've almost lost her in the space of a few days and to two people we have no idea how to kill. I mean, Slade isn't dead, he's just really blind and locked up. And Zoom… he's in an entirely different realm of 'how do you fight this.' Because how do you fight someone like him? How do we fight someone who can travel through time? Who can find us wherever we are? Who can appear at *any* time?"

"With friends," Oliver replies instantly, sounding ridiculously *sane* and uncharacteristically optimistic compared to her. "Barry. Sara."

"Or," she says, ignoring him, forcing herself back into hushed whispers as she looks at Ellie. "Or, how do we manage knowing that we've only had her for a few days and we've already almost lost her *twice*? Oliver, how do we do this all the time? How do we-"

"Felicity, *stop*," Oliver says sharply, cutting her off. Her mouth snaps shut at the quiet intensity staring down at her - his eyes are dark, his jaw tight, the lines of his face taut. He cups her cheek, his thumb brushing over her lips. "Nothing will happen to her, because we won't let it. *I* won't let it." He's *certain*, beyond a doubt, but it's lined with a desperation that makes him look almost manic as he whispers, "Not ever."

She doesn't respond, but he doesn't expect her to, she can see it in his eyes - there's nothing she can say, nothing that needs to be said. It's the same feeling in her - the same fear, the same desperation, the same *love* for their daughter that is absolutely inexplicable, something that can't be described or explained… except between them.

A light flush breaks out across her chest, heating her cheeks.

"Something else is different too," Felicity whispers. She wonders if he sees it in her face because his eyes dart down to her lips.

"What?" he asks.

"You know," she starts, licking her lips. His eyes darken even more and that warmth inside her slowly starts to turn molten, "How life or death situations make you want to do life-affirming things? Like… things I didn't really think about before, not in a realistic kind of way, because I didn't exactly have a someone to do anything with. Things…" His mouth parts with an unsteady breath. "Things I've been thinking about a lot, especially since last night." A smirk tugs at his lips, the kind of smirk she might expect from any guy, until he blushes. The light pink travels across his cheeks, and it only gives the warmth lacing its way through her veins strength. "But it's not so much about the 'yay' of being alive as… I don't… I don't know how to describe it." Felicity drops her hand to her stomach, digging her nails into her muscles. "It's like I need to…"

"Feel."

His voice is suddenly low, rough, and it matches the look on his face as he stares at her.

Felicity shivers, leaning into him as she nods, touching his chest again.

"You," she breathes. "I need to feel *you*. It's you, it's like… my body is telling me there is a way to beat Zoom. There is a way... a way he can't touch or control us. Something he can't take away from us."

Oliver only stares at her. It still amazes her how much he lets her see now - all of it, everything, and what he's showing her… he's right there with her. It's all there in his eyes for her to soak in - the want, the hope, the plans for their future. She sees him kissing her and her returning it with just as much need. She sees herself pushing him backwards until they find the closet or the bathroom or the bed or *any flat surface*, whatever comes first, and both of them giving into that carnal need that's making her skin suddenly feel way too tight. He'd barely touched her last night and it'd been explosive - she *needs* that feeling back, she needs to *feel* him.

It's *tempting* and Felicity's actually a little frightened at the intensity of it, at how *willing* she is to throw caution to the wind right now.

"Felicity…" he whispers, shaking his head, and she can hear he's right there with her. His fingers dig into her, holding her tightly. "I…"

And then his eyes slip shut and he lets out a breathy chuckle, his forehead falling against hers. He melts against her, and just like that, everything comes rushing back - where they are, what they need to do.

Felicity groans. "I sound horrible, don't I? Like, hey, our bodies interlock, let's try it, like no big deal."

"Then I must be horrible too," Oliver replies, "because I've been thinking exactly the same thing since you took your shirt off for your shower."

Felicity's heart jumps at that, at the prospect of him catching sight of her partially undressed. "Did you see anything good?"

Oliver smiles, pulling back to look at her with a smile that she feels in her bones. "I always see something good when I look at you."

Felicity blushes - never in her life would she have imagined him saying such things to her, things that make her stomach twist with nerves in a way that makes her legs feel weak.

"But no," he continues, pushing his hand around until he's cupping the back of her neck before letting it slide down her spine. "I didn't."

"Your loss."

Oliver chuckles, licking his lips *slowly*. "The first time I see all of you, Felicity, it's going to be on our terms."

The thought of him *seeing* all of her like that, it makes her insides quake. Felicity swallows, digging her nails into his chest as she whispers,"Oh?"

He nods with a soft, "Mmhmm," as he leans closer, until he's all she sees, all she feels. "And it's going to be in our bed, where I can take my time." Her mouth goes dry. "When I can properly see…" he pulls her closer, "and enjoy every inch of you."

She stops breathing… more from the promise in his words than anything.

The air around them grows thick with everything going unsaid, everything they definitely, *definitely* don't have time for, everything they cannot do right then, everything they *want* to do.

But later, it will happen later.

Felicity takes a breath and blows it out slowly, biting her lip. He catches the movement, and she knows he's going to make good on his promise.

Oliver gives her a soft, chaste kiss, one that tastes of the future. She hums against his lips.

"I cannot believe how much has happened," Felicity whispers absently. She might be saying that for the next twenty years at this rate, because whenever she stops to think about the fact that just a few days ago Oliver barely looked at her with anything past mediocre, friendly interest to this, to her telling him she has this soul-deep need to *feel* him in a way that makes her heart race and him whispering about seeing her, all of her, and taking his time.

It's a lot. It's the best kind of overwhelming.

"You're handling it really well, considering," Oliver says.

Felicity laughs. "I wouldn't be doing nearly as well if this was just me. It helps." She looks at him, sliding her hand up his chest, her finger tapping his chin. "This. You and me. It helps."

"Me too." Oliver holds her closer. "I wouldn't be nearly as calm without you here. With me."

With me. The words mean so much more than anything she could have imagined.

"You would," Felicity replies. And he would, she knows it. With her there or not, at the end of the day, it's Ellie who has prompted the real changes and she knows without a single doubt that Oliver would be an amazing father, no matter the circumstances. "You might be a little bit crankier, but you would."

He closes his eyes - not to avoid her, but to marvel.

"We should get that little girl of ours and go downstairs. Get this over with," Felicity says, her voice steady. In fact, her hands are steady, *she's* steady. Before he can say anything, she reaches up to grasp his chin, keeping him still for one more kiss as she whispers, "Thank you." Another kiss. "You seem to have a knack for calming down crazed-me."

Oliver smiles against her lips. "You're welcome. And thank *you*."

"You're welcome," she echoes, kissing him again. "I love you."

"I love you."

Felicity steps back, moving to wipe the light smudge of lipstick off his lips when he pulls her back into his chest, wrapping his arms around her. Oliver pushes his face into her neck, breathing her in as she hugs him back.

The quiet moment is interrupted when Ellie says something to herself from inside her pillow castle, immediately followed by a knock at the door.

Felicity jumps as Oliver stiffens. The sound of it opening has them both turning, their arms tightening just in case - Oliver's already moving her so she's behind him - but it's only Moira.

"Oh," she says, surprise coloring her features. "I didn't mean to interrupt." Her words say one thing, but the fact that she doesn't make a move to go anywhere tells Felicity everything she needs to know.

It's time to face the choir, a choir that has a horde of flashing light bulbs and painfully intrusive questions that she still hasn't really let herself think about.

"Right," Felicity says as Oliver replies, "We'll be right down."

Felicity glances over at the tent, realizing as she sees her daughter's little shadow moving back into the corner that she's fallen silent. She frowns, her stomach sinking - Ellie's only been there for a few days, but she already knows without a doubt that it's definitely not normal for her to slink back like that.

Uh oh.

She's already making her way to the tent as Moira says, "The car's out front." Oliver's hand follows Felicity until she's out of reach, and she can feel his eyes on her as Moira adds, "And Oliver, I imagine you'll want to clean up a bit more."

Felicity glances back at that - he looks *amazing*, what is she talking about? - to find the older woman tapping her lips. Oliver blushes - he *blushes*, like he's not a grown man but is actually a boy who just caught making out with a girl by his mother. It's adorable and she pinches her lips to keep from smiling as she reaches the tent.

"Ellie? You ready to go?"

No response.

Felicity leans over, peeking into the tent. "Ellie?"

The little girl in question is sitting in the far corner, still impeccably dressed in the simple Burberry sheath-dress that makes her look like the little princess she definitely is. Her shoes are off though, her hair a little tangled and it definitely looks like she's going nowhere as she picks up a doll that had shown up in their room along with the pile of clothes, smoothing its hair down.

"Hey there, Ellie-bug," Felicity says softly, getting down on her knees. She hears Oliver coming up behind her. "You ready to go?"

Ellie remains uncharacteristically quiet and Felicity's stomach sinks even further. She glances back at Oliver, who leans over to look in as well. They both watch Ellie pinch her lips together before shaking her head.

"What's the matter, Ellie-bug?" Oliver asks.

"I don't wanna go," she replies, so quietly they barely hear her.

"What?"

"I don't wanna leave," Ellie shouts, loud enough that it makes Felicity jump. The little girl's eyes never leave her doll.

"Oh," Felicity replies, not missing the sudden storm of emotions that cross Oliver's face before he reels it back in, the mixture of hurt and the need to protect her draining away until he's a little pale. He wants to say no - he wants her to go, to be with them, as much for her safety as for him - but she knows he's not about to make her do anything, not after that morning. So what then? "Um…"

"I guess…" Oliver's mouth moves soundlessly before he looks at Felicity and then Moira, whose face is pinched with sympathy.

"We need to go, Oliver," Moira reiterates gently.

"I know, I know… I guess…" he says again, looking back at Felicity. She's already shaking her head - there's no way he's going to face the press on his own, no *way* - as her heart cracks at the sound in his voice as he says, "I guess you could stay with her… if Sara and Digg and the security team do, too."

"Oliver-"

"No, Daddy," Ellie says abruptly, shaking her head. Her eyes are wide and painfully beautiful, and Felicity's heart cracks the rest of the way when she sees the tears shining back at her, highlighting the very real fear there. "I don't want you to go either."

Oliver's face positively breaks. "Oh, baby," he says, moving to crawl in but Felicity's already making her way in there, reaching for their daughter, not giving a damn about her dress or hair.

"Come here, sweetie," Felicity whispers and Ellie's lower lip trembles before she launches herself into Felicity's arms with a tiny sob. The doll is crushed between them, pressing painfully into her clavicle, but she doesn't care one bit as she holds her daughter closer, wishing there was a way to absorb what Ellie was feeling. Her own tears burn her eyes and she blinks them away, looking back at Oliver.

He's already crawling in with them, pressing a kiss to Ellie's head, one hand landing on Felicity's shoulder, the other rubbing gentle circles on Ellie's back.

"Your daddy has to go, honey," Felicity says, keeping her voice low, turning to speak into her ear. "He has to talk to the reporters, remember?"

"No," Ellie says, shaking her head, her voice cracking with tears. "I don't want him to."

"Ellie…"

"No!" she says, her tears falling on Felicity's neck. "Zoom will get him. Zoom will hurt him! It's *safe* here. The fairies made it safe! It's fairy magic. Zoom can't go fast in the castle. It makes him all slow so daddy can beat him. It's a *special spot.* He's never been here! Anywhere else and Daddy is going to get hurt!"

"Oh, Ellie," Oliver whispers. He kisses her head again, breathing her in and when he looks at Felicity again, his eyes are red with unshed tears. He's torn - he knows what he has to do, but she also knows that if Ellie really asked him to, he would stay, the consequences be damned. Felicity reaches out, cupping his cheek and he leans into it, closing his eyes. "I won't let that happen, okay?"

Ellie pulls back to look at him and the misery on her little face is almost too much as she clings to Felicity, staring at Oliver. Tear tracks decorate her cheeks as she whispers, "I don't want the bad man to get you again, Daddy, I don't want you to get hurt."

"What?" Oliver asks, shaking his head. "He didn't-"

"He *did*! He hurt you!"

"Okay, okay," Oliver whispers, nodding. "Okay."

The fact that he doesn't say he's not going isn't lost on either of them.

So Zoom hurts him in the future, badly enough that Ellie was aware of it. Was that part of the reason they sent her back, because they got hurt protecting her in the future?

The fear from earlier stampedes through Felicity's chest - that they can't protect her here. If they can't do anything in the future, what can they possibly do here? How can they possibly fight something that their future selves fall against? She holds Ellie closer, closing her eyes for a second before *needing* to see Oliver again. He's staring at Ellie, his face tight, his lips pinched together in a poor example of a smile, one that's probably supposed to reassure Ellie but it's not doing a great job.

And then he meets Felicity's gaze.

What are they going to do?

A soft shuffle outside the castle pulls their attention. *Moira*. "Oliver…"

"I know, Mom," he says, scrubbing his face.

Oliver sighs, bowing his head before looking at Ellie again. She's turned her face into Felicity's neck again, her shallow breathing starting to even out now that she's in her arms. Something deep inside Felicity clicks into place at that. There's nothing she won't do for her daughter - absolutely nothing - and if that just means holding her in this simple moment or fighting the monster chasing after her, then she'll do just that for the rest of time.

Oliver shifts closer, wrapping himself around both of them, and that has a whole other piece clicking into place. Her family, together… *strong*. Oliver moves so his cheek rests against Felicity's other shoulder, so he's facing Ellie, and it makes Felicity's heart skip a couple dozen beats. She could do this forever, she realizes, hold them against her just like that. In fact, once everything with the press is over, when they have a second, she thinks she might. Felicity leans her head against Ellie's as Oliver brushes her curly hair off her face, caressing her little cheek.

"Ellie," Oliver whispers. The little girl sniffles, moving her face just enough to see him. When Oliver catches her gaze, he smiles, a real smile that reaches his eyes. "Hi there."

"Hi," she replies, her voice tiny. She sniffles and her little hand finds the emblem on her necklace. She plays with it as she looks at Oliver.

"Can you do something for me?" he asks. Ellie hesitates, for a second, before nodding. Felicity feels Oliver smile. "You're so brave, baby girl." Ellie nods and it's so cute and *right* that Felicity can't help but chuckle. "Do you remember what happened downstairs?"

Ellie instantly stiffens. "I don't want to, Daddy."

"I know, baby, but try. Okay? Remember how Zoom went away after I got there?"

It's flimsy as hell, and Felicity fights the urge to flinch because that's not really what happened, not by a long shot… but it works. Ellie pauses, and then she nods.

Oliver smoothes Ellie's hair off her face, his hand looking so ridiculously large in comparison to her that it's shocking. He's trying to make her feel safe, and it's working for both of them.

"I won't let anything happen to you, Ellie-bug," Oliver says. "Or your mom, or me. Okay?"

"Do you promise?"

Felicity's eyes slam shut at that, at the weight of what she's asking, but Oliver doesn't even hesitate.

"I promise."

Ellie nods, sniffling again. "Okay."

Oliver smiles. "That's my girl." Felicity can feel the shift in Ellie, feel her preening under her father's pride in her, and she lifts her head, nodding again. Oliver sits up, wiping her cheeks before pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "I love you, Ellie-bug."

"I love you too, Daddy."

Oliver turns to Felicity, his large hand cupping the back of her neck as he gives her a kiss as well. They give themselves a moment, his forehead pressing into hers, before Moira shifts outside the tent again.

"So, we're all going then?" Felicity asks, looking down at Ellie. She nods, pressing her lips together, but instead of fear on her face, now there's resolve. Felicity grins, kissing the top of her head. "You are definitely your daddy's daughter."

"I would argue that she's definitely her mother's daughter," Oliver says, making Felicity blush. "Alright then. Let's go."

Chapter 18

Despite his earlier wavering on the subject in the face of Ellie's tears - his gut clenches thinking about it again, the fear in her eyes amplifying how helpless he felt - there is no way in the world that Oliver is about to let either her or Felicity out of his sight. Not for an instant. Not after this morning. After Zoom materialized in the kitchen, reaching out for Ellie like he had every intention of wrapping his fingers around her neck and *squeezing*… well, he might have put on a brave face for her, but Felicity's not the only one who's going to have nightmares about that.

Given what they're facing, it makes sense that Zoom could pop up at any time. They've known since the beginning that he was chasing Ellie through time, but the reality of how ever-present the threat to her really is hadn't quite sunk in. Not until this morning. Who the hell is this guy and what does Ellie do to have him literally running through time to get her?

Still… the need to keep her close - to keep her protected - is sharply at odds with the need to keep her away from the press. Because he has to do this press conference. He *has to*, even if it's the very last thing he wants to be doing today.

"Oliver… I don't think you've thought this through," his mother says for what feels like the hundredth time since he's informed her he flatly refuses to allow Ellie out of his sight even for an instant. He might've entertained it earlier, might have been okay with her just being in the back, but after Ellie's reaction, now he *needs* to see her. It's just as important for him as it is for her. "Mister Diggle and Sara are more than capable of protecting Ellie. I understand you're shaken. I am too. But having her anywhere near those reporters is asking for trouble we simply cannot afford."

"I'm done with this conversation," Oliver tells her, rather than arguing his position *again*.

Ellie's tucked up against his side in the car - they really need to get her a car seat - her body lax and fully at easy because *he's* there. Because she feels safe with him. Even if he didn't need her with him for his own sense of security, he owes it to Ellie to be with her for hers.

"Felicity, surely you realize what a potential landmine this is?" Moira questions, changing tactics.

"It really is," Laurel chimes in - it shouldn't surprise him she's on his mother's side on this - followed by Sara's, "Digg and I *can* protect her, Ollie," from the driver's seat.

The Lance sisters united with his mother on anything is a bit daunting. And strange. He can't begin to process how unsettling it is that Laurel's even *here,* but it's weirder still the way his mother is treating her so coolly, especially when she's done nothing but voice her support for every single thing Moira has said. For a reason he can't fathom yet, his mother has taken to treating Laurel more like an employee than someone she's known since she was in pigtails.

"Felicity, darling..." Moira begins again.

The weird things about today aren't about to stop, apparently. The term of endearment throws Felicity at least as much as it does him. Her fingers spasm in his hand and she seems to choke on air, suddenly coughing violently.

"You okay?" he murmurs, attempting not to sound amused and failing spectacularly as he squeezes her hand in a silent show of support.

"Fine," she says, waving off his concern with her free hand and clearing her throat. "Just, uh… allergies or wildly shifting worldview or… something. I'm fine."

Moira quietly takes a small bottle of water from the limo mini-fridge and passes it to Felicity. The older woman is watching her like a hawk, and Oliver knows his mother well enough to be fully aware that she's evaluating how she can make her case, sway Felicity's opinion.

Luckily for him, he's pretty sure she can't.

"Thank you," Felicity tells Moira after taking a swig of water.

"Of course," Moira demures. "Now… about Ellie…"

"Oliver's right," Felicity replies immediately, backing him up like the partner she is, like the partner she's *always* been. "I trust Digg and Sara with my life and with Ellie's, but he's right. We're her parents and she needs us. After everything that's happened, it wouldn't be fair to her."

"I wanna stay with daddy," Ellie chimes in. She leans a little closer to him as she speaks and his arm tightens around her without even thinking about it.

"Of course you do," Moira says with forced patience lacing her tone before looking back up to Oliver and Felicity. "Of course she does, but there are dangers beyond Zoom." Ellie flinches, turning her head into his side. He holds her tighter. "We need to be smart about this."

"I'm done talking about this," Oliver informs her for the second time, more firmly than the last. "She and Felicity can be off to the side, toward the back, out of the reporters' line of sight. Digg and Sara can protect them from the press if they're noticed, but I *refuse* to have her somewhere I can't see her. What's the use of protecting her from the media if Zoom can just…"

Ellie shivers again, a whimper slipping past her lips and before Oliver can tell her it's going to be okay, she's climbing up onto his lap, shoving her face into his chest, clinging to his jacket. He can't finish his sentence - he can't even finish his *thought* - as he releases Felicity's hand to cradle her closer. Felicity rests her head on Oliver's shoulder, wrapping her arm around both of them, pressing her lips into a thin line. Her face crumples as Ellie burrows into the safety of his embrace.

"Don't make me go away," Ellie mumbles, the sound muffled by the fabric of his suit. "I wanna be with you, daddy."

"I've got you, Ellie," he vows to her quietly, his hand spanning her entire back as he holds her tightly. "You aren't going anywhere. I promise."

He ignores his mother's beleaguered sigh and Laurel's small huff. There's no denying their point, but Ellie's security far outweighs their concerns. The press will be intrusive, but they aren't about to *hurt* her, and he's there to mitigate everything, to keep things from getting too far out of control. It helps knowing that Felicity is in full agreement with him on this. Zoom's presence rattled her every bit as much as it did him and they're both more than a little terrified at the threat he represents.

He feels the weight of Sara's eyes on him in the rearview mirror. He knows she's appraising him, thinking through where he's at; she's aware, more than anyone else here, that he's made up his mind and that he won't be changing it.

A series of beeps prefaces her quiet, "Digg?" Oliver's gaze shifts from Ellie toward the front seat to where Sara cradles her cell phone between her ear and shoulder as she drives. "We may have a slight change in plans…"

He fully trusts Sara and Digg with press conference security, but he still makes every effort to listen in to their evolving strategy until Ellie tears his attention away. Her little fingers pull on the lapels of his jacket, tugging twice in quick succession to earn his focus.

"Can we go back home?" she asks. Her gorgeous blue eyes are huge and filling with tears as she looks up at him, inadvertently breaking his heart a bit.

"Not yet, honey," he replies, his voice heavy with regret. He makes every effort to quell her fears, wrapping his arm tighter around her tiny frame, the other hand brushing stray springy curls away from her face.

"Are you sure?" she asks, nervous fingers twisting his jacket. "I think… My fairies need me, daddy. We need to go home now."

"I'm sure Raisa will check in on them for you," he says, fully aware that this isn't her actual concern.

"But…" God help him, her little lower lip starts quivering as her eyes flood with more tears. They threaten to spill over and he's never been more tempted to tell Sara to turn the damned car around. "But… what if… what if *he* comes for them?"

"Oh, Ellie-bug," he manages as a tear escapes down her rosy little cheek. He wipes it away, hating how much he's seen her cry in such a short amount of time. He'd do anything to spare her this kind of terror, anything at all, but, in this case, he doesn't know *how*. "You don't need to worry about that. The fairies are fine and so are you, okay?"

"But…" She's shaking, trying to keep herself from crying, but she fails miserably.

Ellie lets out a hitched sob, her face crumpling before she buries her face in his chest, crying her fear into the fabric of his suit. Armani makes for a pretty terrible tissue, but Oliver can't bring himself care as he hugs her, whispering soothing noises into her hair.

"They're okay," Felicity reassures, cupping the back of Ellie's head, stroking with her thumb in a calming pattern. Her voice is steady - surprisingly so - but Oliver can see from the look on her face that it's forced for Ellie's benefit. Glassy eyes and a reddened tip to her nose make it plain to see she's still every bit as distraught by Ellie's terror as he is.

Ellie shakes her head fiercely against his chest, still not pulling away to look up at either of them.

"They *are*," Felicity says a little more firmly. Her eyes brighten as an idea dawns on her. "Do you know how I know that?"

Ellie tilts her head to the side, peeking one eye out to watch her mother. "How?"

"Because they have someone there to protect them. A *hero*," she says, sounding incredibly self-satisfied and fully confident. Her tone is enough to make Ellie look at her fully, turning her head more, but still keeping herself pressed as closely to her father as she can.

"A hero?" she sniffles, doubt weighing the word down. "What kind of hero?"

"The kind who protects people, who saves the fairy kingdom," Felicity replies, her voice hushed like it's some huge secret she's letting Ellie in on.

Ellie sits up. "Does he have superpowers?"

"Nope," Felicity says, tapping Ellie on the nose. "Just a bow and arrow and a really big heart."

It slams into him then what she's doing and his eyes snap to hers. Her unwavering faith has always astounded him. Even at his worst - even when he'd been a killer; even when he'd given up - she has always, *always* believed in him. That she reassures Ellie with that belief, that she passes it on to their daughter… it's indescribable the way that makes him feel. Grateful. Unworthy. So, *so* damned lucky he can't even believe it.

"Felicity," he says in a whisper of an exhale.

She smiles a little at him, a tiny curl at the edge of her lips and a light to her eyes that dances like she's masking a poorly kept secret. Then she turns back to Ellie and wipes away the girl's tears with her thumb before continuing.

"He'll keep them safe, Ellie. You'll see," she advises. "It's what he does. It's who he is."

Felicity's hand winds up on his chest, fingers edging beneath his tie and settling between the top two buttons. It's only her touch that

makes him realize he's not actually breathing at the moment. He's overwhelmed, undone, three steps past in love with her straight on to something else that lacks a word to define it.

It isn't just how he feels about her, or how he feels about *them*. It's how she *sees* him, who he feels like he might actually be when he's with her. Oliver's never liked himself as much as he does when he sees glimpses of himself through her eyes. Felicity doesn't just believe in him - she makes him feel like maybe he can believe in himself. And that… It's addictive, hypnotic. He craves it, craves *her*, in a way he hadn't quite realized was possible before they'd met.

"Really?" Ellie asks, looking up at him for affirmation and momentarily breaking his focus on Felicity. "Is there a fairy hero, daddy? Do they have a Green Arrow, too?"

The name throws him for a moment, but he recovers quickly. Whatever name he goes by in the future - no matter how lame it still kinda sounds - doesn't matter in the least. It's Ellie who matters, Ellie who needs his reassurance.

"Anytime things get bad, somebody will step up to be a hero, Ellie-bug," he tells her. "Whether that means picking up a bow and arrow or… or taking a big risk to find a friend who's gone missing. If things get scary, there will always be people… or fairies… who help others."

She hums a little noise of contemplation at that, her grip on him loosening substantially as she mulls his words over. Felicity, on the other hand, tightens her grip, her fingers curling around the edge of his dress shirt, between the buttons. She tugs a bit to gain his attention, pulling him closer.

The way she looks at him sets his heart fluttering wildly. It's obvious she fully approves of his handling of the situation, but it's more than that. There's a flush to her cheeks and her blue eyes are *so bright* and happy as they search his.

Because he'd called her a hero, he realizes suddenly.

Maybe he's not the only one who likes the way he looks in someone else's eyes.

The moment lengthens between them and for a measureless span of time it doesn't matter in the least that his mother's there. Or Sara. Or Laurel. Or even Ellie, since she's safely perched on his lap. It's just them. Just this… *look*. It's unifying, fortifying, bonding in a way he

couldn't have expected. The whole world boils down to the two of them and everything else fades away in the distance.

Not touching her isn't an option. It's not sexual in the least, it's more basic than that. He needs a *connection*, to feel her skin beneath his fingers and prove to himself that this is real. With the way she's gripping his shirt, fingertips slipping through to touch the skin just above his undershirt, he thinks she feels exactly the same way.

His free hand moves of its own accord to cup her elbow, fingers gently stroking the outside of her arm. He's infinitely glad she's wearing a sleeveless dress because the feel of her skin grounds him, roots him in this like nothing else possibly could.

It's right. It's home. It's *family*.

And it's everything he never knew he needed.

In spite of the trials in front of them, in spite of the risks and the harsh realities that lay in their future, he's never felt quite so much like all the pieces of his life have fit together as he does in this instant.

"Ollie." Sara's voice breaks through the confines of the bubble they've ensconsed themselves in. "We're here."

Felicity jolts at that, releasing Oliver's shirt, shaking herself like she's in a bit of a daze. She probably is. *He* is, anyhow.

"Come here, Ellie," Felicity says, composing herself as she reaches for the toddler and pulls her to stand in front of her.

Ellie might have settled down, but her nose is red and there are dried tear tracks on her cheeks; she's most definitely not ready to be anywhere near where reporters might spot her. Looking down at his suit, Oliver realizes he's really not either.

"I don't suppose you have a spare jacket?" Oliver asks, turning to his mother who is watching him with a hawk-like gaze that cuts right through him. What she's thinking, he has no idea, but her gaze softens, seeming almost respectful and affectionate all at once.

"I don't," she says after a moment. "But, as much as I would prefer you in a suit for this, you don't have to be. You're not a CEO anymore. With the role we're casting for you in Ellie's life, this may actually work to our advantage. Any of the reporters who are parents will surely relate to a last moment wardrobe adjustment."

"Address it directly," Laurel advises, turning her gaze from the streetside to Oliver. "Diffuse that question before it crops up."

"Okay," Oliver agrees before Ellie's giggle draws his attention.

Her eyes are closed as Felicity brushes some sort of makeup powder on her cheeks, chasing away the evidence of her earlier tears, her delighted smile chasing away any remnants of what's been an otherwise dismal morning so far.

"That's silly, momma," she says, grabbing for the brush. "Can I do it to you now?"

"Okay," Felicity relents, handing over the brush. "But just a little powder, okay? And try to be careful not to get any on my dress." Ellie takes the advice to heart. Her idea of brushing it over Felicity's skin is the brush barely touching her, and Felicity pinches her lips to keep from grinning as she says, "That's perfect, Ellie-bug."

They're perfect.

"We ready?" Sara asks, turning from the driver's seat to lean over the partition. "We've got ten minutes 'til showtime."

Oliver hesitates. He looks at Ellie and Felicity and he *hesitates*. Because no, he's not ready. He's explained to Ellie what's going to happen, as best he can anyhow, and they have a plan in place - a good plan, a solid plain - but he still has to get up in front of a room full of cameras and reporters and tell them all that Ellie isn't really his daughter. And he has to walk in that room separate from them. He's not sure which idea is bothering him more, at this point - disclaiming Ellie, or being apart from her and Felicity for less than five minutes.

"Digg and I've got them," Sara says, reading him like an open book. "As soon as you're in front of the mic, we'll slip in the back. You'll barely have them out of sight at all. Take a breath, Ollie." She smirks. "It's not like you're sending her off to college."

That comment does absolutely nothing to settle him. His whole body jerks, completely and totally objecting to that notion on a basic, visceral level. Sara - because she's Sara - chuckles and shakes her head.

"That was a particularly terrible idea to put in his head if you expect him to get out of the car without her, Miss Lance," Moira chastises, eyebrow raised in a challenging look that would have made anyone

else wither.

Sara takes it with ease, shrugging one shoulder and grinning like she knows some kind of secret.

His mother is not amused.

"I'm going to go find Mark and go over some last minute details," Laurel announces, moving to open the door.

"Laurel," Moira ventures coolly, touching the younger woman's arm. Laurel pauses, looking back with a slight frown. "I do want to tell you how much I appreciate your discretion and your specialized legal experience. As you're well aware, there's nothing more important to me than protecting my family."

Trust Moira Queen to make a statement equal parts threat and 'thank you.'

Laurel's smart enough and has known the Queen family long enough that there's no way she misses any of the levels of meaning in Moira's words. And, indeed, Oliver finds her blinking in affronted surprise back at his mother.

"I'm happy to help," Laurel says, enunciating the words carefully. "I've always loved your family."

"Oh, of that I am well aware," Moira responds with a thin, biting smile.

"It's amazing what we'll do to protect our families," Sara says, drawing Moira's attention. "Isn't it?"

Her tone is light but her look is not. There's a challenge in Sara's eyes that Oliver's seen many times, and he knows to be wary of it, but his mother has no such respect. The two of them lock gazes with polite smiles that do nothing to mask the undertone that's swiftly filling the car, quickly putting him even on more edge that he already is.

"Everybody is very helpful and protecting everybody else," Felicity announces with a nervous laugh. "Yay us!"

It's ridiculous enough that it draws both Moira and Sara's attention, cutting through the atmosphere that's saturated the air, and thank goodness for that. His mother squaring off against Sara could not possibly end well. For anyone.

Laurel, however, takes it far less seriously than he does. She rolls her eyes dramatically, though whether that's at Felicity's anxious words or the way her sister and his mother's contest of wills is anyone's guess, and opens the door without another word. She slides out with poise, like she hasn't just been subtly berated by Moira Queen herself, and strides past Digg with her head held high. She's focused enough that she barely spares a nod in Digg's direction. The look of confusion on the other man's face as he looks at Oliver tells him very clearly that there's going to be a conversation between them in the very near future about what exactly is going on with Laurel, and probably everything else he's missed in the last twenty-four hours, which is a lot.

"Hey," Digg says in greeting when he reaches the car, bending down to look through the door Laurel had left open in her wake. "Everything's set."

Oliver nods. Resolve works its way into his bones - it's time to get this going, to get it *over*. The sooner he gets up in front of the press, the sooner he can head home with Felicity and Ellie. That thought alone is enough to spur him on.

He moves to get out of the car but Ellie's little hand shoots out again, grabbing his shoulder with an alarmed, "No, daddy, I wanna stay with you."

"I know," he tells her, pulling her toward him and kissing her forehead. "And you will be. It's just for a minute, okay?" She opens her mouth to argue, but he heads her off with, "And I need you to look after mommy for me. Digg and Sara can't do it alone. They need you to hold her hand, okay?"

"So… so if things get scary, I need to help her? Like the fairy hero?" she asks, all innocence and nerves.

A lump forms in his throat, making it hard to speak. Images of Ellie putting herself between Zoom and Felicity, yelling at him to leave her mommy alone wash over him with alarming clarity and he has to blink double-time to clear his vision.

"No, baby girl," he manages. "No, if things get scary it's your job to get yourself and mommy to me, okay? But they won't. This is just for a minute, and Digg and Sara will be with you the whole time. I don't want you to worry, okay?"

It takes her a second but she finally nods, uncertainty tinging her

voice as she says, "Okay."

"Okay." He gives her a reassuring smile before looking up. "Felicity…"

"I've got her," Felicity promises. She leans forward, pecking him softly on the lips. "Now go sweet talk those reporters so we can get this over with."

He doubts it will be as easy as that, but she lends him the strength he needs to power forward, especially when she winks at him. It's exactly what he needs. With one last stroke of his hand through Ellie's curls, he scoots out of the limo, Diggle stepping back to make room for him, before offering his mother a hand out as well.

"Thank you, Oliver," Moira says graciously, primly straightening her suit. Oliver just gives her an affectionate nod before shrugging his jacket off. He tosses it back into the limo and rolls up his shirt sleeves.

"Digg," he starts, turning toward the other man as Sara gets out of the car to join them. "If anything-"

"Stop worrying," Diggle orders. "We've got your back. And…" He pulls something out of his pocket. "I found something that might give you a bit of an edge up there."

Oliver furrows his brow in question, but he doesn't have to ask as Diggle immediately elaborates.

"Found this last night," Digg says, placing something small in Oliver's hand. "Figured you might have a few ideas how to work it to our advantage."

"Is this…" Oliver starts, eyes widening as he examines the item in his palm.

"Sure is," Diggle confirms with a small, satisfied smile.

Possibilities race through Oliver's mind, each more promising than the last, and he finds himself grinning at the prospects in front of them.

"*Thank you*," he says, clasping Diggle's shoulder in gratitude.

"Anytime, man," the other man confirms. "Now get in there. We got your girls."

His heart flip-flops at the casual recognition of Ellie and Felicity being his, of him being theirs.

Slipping the item into his pocket, Oliver casts one last glance back at his family. Felicity waves and Ellie follows suit, prompting an easy grin from him as he waves back. Ellie instantly smiles, and her natural, happy response sends a surge of confidence through him - confidence that they *are* doing the right thing and that this *will* work. Following Felicity's suit, Oliver winks at both of them and he swears he sees Felicity blush before he turns to head into his mother's campaign headquarters.

Over the years, Oliver has spent a lot of time in front of the press, but he hasn't seen a mass of reporters like the crowd inside his mother's office since right after he got back from the island. He'd known this would be a big deal - the crowd at the gates last night had been proof enough for that - but there's a difference between *knowing* it and *seeing* it.

The din of questions shouted at him as he walks into the room is deafening. They clamor with questions he can't even hear, the raised voices creating a wall of white noise. They have to know he won't answer - not now - but they don't seem to care. They're hungry for a story and they'll aggressively pursue that, even when it's about to be *given* to them on a silver platter.

"If you could all give Mr. Queen a moment to get to the mic, we can get started," a voice says from overhead - Mark, his mother's campaign manager, is at the podium, waving them closer.

Oliver forces what he hopes is a convincing smile onto his face and keeps a hand on his mother's elbow as the two of them ignore the blinding lights of flashbulbs and make their way to the microphone. The flashing lights only seem to grow more insistent and he forces himself to maintain a happy facade as he covers the mic, leaning back towards Laurel and Mark..

"Laurel, if you're right about Blood, his people are going to hit back after this," Oliver advises them both. "I've got something they aren't going to expect."

Laurel merely raises her eyebrows in question at that, but Mark instantly blanches, looking like he's about to grab Oliver bodily as he says, "Oliver, what-"

"Trust me," Oliver cuts him off. "This is going to help us."

He doesn't wait for either of them to respond before he turns back toward the microphone. He pauses, surveying the crowd, taking a

second… His mother's a few steps away, her presence looming, and after a second, through the blinding light of cameras going off, he catches sight of Diggle slipping into the back of the room. He holds his breath, waiting, and then there's a flash of a familiar blonde ponytail from behind him, mostly blocked by Digg's bulky frame.

Oliver's mind instantly settles knowing Felicity and Ellie are there.

Time to take control of this mess, then.

"Sorry for the delay, everybody," Oliver says with a winning smile that almost feels genuine. "And for the lack of the rest of my suit. As some of you might know, little kids have a way of destroying clothing."

The reference to Ellie sets them off all over again, the crowd shouting anew, thrusting microphones forward. They're like fish competing for food that's just been sprinkled into their aquarium. The surge in noise and energy that comes at him stuns him for a second - it's *amazing* how much this tiny story has blown up already.

It's pointless trying to say anything in the face of this and he just shakes his, looking back at his mother. Moira maintains her composure with all of the class he'd expected, giving him a look that says, '*I know. Patience.'*

Mark comes forward, speaking loudly into the microphone. "If you'll all settle down a moment, Mr. Queen will make a statement." The noise slowly dies down, until it's just a few random questions being tossed at them. Mark handles it like the pro he is. "We'd ask that everyone save your questions for the end. We might have a chance to take a few if we can get this moving along."

At the promise of their questions being fielded at the end, they finally quiet down, but Oliver's not sure he's ever had so many microphones and cameras in his face before in his life.

"Yesterday afternoon, a lot of you reported that I have a daughter," he starts off. The press collectively holds their breaths, hanging on his every word, suddenly so silent you could hear a pin drop. "I wish I could say that I do, because I would do anything to be Lily's father. But I'm not. I think we're all well aware of where I was three or four years ago and I certainly wasn't in any position to become someone's father.

"Those of you who paid attention to gossip when I was at the helm of Queen Consolidated are probably aware of the rumors that circulated

about myself and my assistant, Felicity Smoak," he continues, unable to keep his gaze from flitting toward where she stands in the back of the room. "While there was never anything tawdry or scandalous about our relationship, I do have to admit that I'm madly in love with her and have been for…" His brain races to quantify it, but he can't. He meets Felicity's eyes. "For quite some time."

Even from across the room he can see the pleased flush working its way across her cheeks and the reporters break into a dull murmur. He raises his hand in an indication he's going to continue and they settle again.

"She has custody - for the time being - of a relative's child," Oliver says. "Lily's young, very young... and in the time she's been with Felicity she's come to view us both as her parents. It's a role I am more than happy to fill. Family has always been important to me - it's a value taught to me by my mother - and I love that little girl like she was my own. Because of an ongoing court case for permanent custody, there's very little I can say about the situation except to express that while I might not be Lily's father, I'm lucky enough to fill the role of her dad and I will cherish that spot in her life as long as I have the opportunity to."

He wasn't sure *what* he was expecting - best case scenario has all of them suddenly losing interest and leaving - but that's definitely not the case. Like they're one collective being, they take advantage of the natural end of his little speech and surge forward, clamoring for more, calling his name like that alone might earn them his attention.

"Oliver. *Oliver*!"

He can't ignore them. Not when they've still got such a vested interest in Ellie, so he picks one, a heavyset black woman he vaguely recognizes as a political reporter from the Starling City Post. She's respectable, at least, not a gossip columnist from the local tabloid.

She steps forward a bit and the others hush around her through some unspoken agreement that Oliver really can't begin to understand.

"Given that the cornerstone of your mother's campaign has always been her dedication to her family, was it your decision to keep Lily out of the public eye or hers?"

"It was mutual," Oliver replies without hesitation. "And one we consulted on with ADA Laurel Lance since she's agreed to serve as Felicity's legal counsel in family court. But ultimately it came down to

Felicity's call. She's the one with custody. We all agreed it was in Lily's best interest to shield her from the media as much as possible. Obviously Alderman Blood made that impossible."

And *oh*, do the press smell the blood in the water at *that*.

"What does that mean? *Oliver*. What do you mean by that?" shouts someone toward the front.

"Look," Oliver says, "I'm not sure who planted surveillance cameras on private property to get covert pictures of a three-year-old and I can't accuse the Alderman of that. But I do know he immediately took advantage by exploiting a child for political gain. It is disturbing that someone I once counted as a friend would use a little girl like that. It definitely would have cost him my vote if he'd had it."

"Mr. Queen!" calls the first woman he'd addressed, earning his attention back and a nod for her to continue. "That's a serious accusation of criminal activity. Do you have any proof of these alleged surveillance cameras?"

It's the *exact* question he was hoping he'd get.

"Yes, I've got proof right here," he says, pulling the small camera out of his pocket and holding it up. "My security detail found this outside my sister's business and there's a dozen more like it that we've found planted all over my mother's house."

The room positively buzzes at this revelation. He's shifted the story and he knows it - it's gone from a secret child and prospective sex scandal to something considerably more clandestine and no less attractive to the press.

"I can't tell you who put them there," Oliver continues, gaining everyone's attention again. "But I can definitely see who might profit from spying on my family… either politically or in business."

A hand appears followed by a reporter with thick glasses and a thicker mustache who asks, "Are you accusing Alderman Blood *and* Isabel Rochev?"

Oliver bites his tongue to keep from giving the man a pleased smirk at the sharp question.

"The only thing I have evidence to accuse them of is using an innocent little girl for political gain," he answers. "I'll leave any other

accusations to the police."

Shouted questions fill the air again and Oliver points at the next reporter. The young man opens his mouth to ask his question but before he can make a sound, the room suddenly goes dark.

For a split second, it's pitch black save for the cameras still flashing - it's nothing, a power surge, the lights faltering - but it's enough for Oliver's heart to damn well near jump right out of his chest, sending a kick of adrenaline rocketing through him. It was *just* that morning that someone tried to *tear through time* to snatch his daughter away from him and yesterday another one held her hostage…

But even if that hadn't been enough to have panic flooding him, Ellie's startled shriek would have.

The lights flicker back to life, just in time for him to see a terrified three-year-old barreling toward him, weaving her way through the press with a speed that's dizzying.

"El-... *Lily!*" Felicity shouts, barely catching herself as she pushes her way past the reporters, but Ellie doesn't slow down, not until she's reached Oliver. He doesn't even have to think - he's already kneeling down, opening his arms to her. Ellie throws herself at him, latching her arms around his neck tightly as he picks her up.

"Hey, hey, you're okay," he whispers, holding her close, smoothing her hair down. "I've got you, baby, it's okay. Why didn't you stay with mommy?"

Ellie buries her face in his neck, her voice so small as she replies, "You said if things got scary to get to you."

He *had* said that. Oliver smiles, nodding, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead. A power surge wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind, but he can't bring himself to care. There's no part of her rushing for the safety she knows she'll find in his arms that he'll ever regret. He's damn proud of that actually, and if the flashbulbs going off wildly are any indication, his face reflects just that.

Felicity finally pushes her way through the crowd to his side, her hand landing on his shoulder, and when he looks up at her, he flinches when a camera flash nearly blinds him.

"Can you guys stop it with the flashes, please?" Oliver asks, unable to keep the edge out of his tone. "She's scared, and she's already been

through some pretty traumatic things before she came to stay with us. Your cameras aren't helping."

The room as a whole hesitates before doing just that, leaving behind a disquiet murmur that fills the room. While a few cameras still click, at least the flashbulbs stop.

"What exactly has she been through?" one reporter asks.

"The bad man came to get me," Ellie replies before Oliver can stop her.

"And we aren't going to talk about that," Laurel says smoothly, stepping up to the mic. "That's strictly off the record."

The reporter shrugs in challenge, replying, "She volunteered it," as if it's perfectly natural to talk to a toddler about this.

"She's also three years old," Laurel counters before Oliver can say just that. "I won't have you jeopardizing a custody battle for the sake of your curiosity. It's off the record. So *stop*."

His face twists in aggravation before he huffs out an unkind, "Fine." He scratches through some notes on his pad of paper.

"Can I…" starts another reporter, stepping forward. "Can I ask her a question? Not about what she's been through, nothing intrusive like that."

Oliver's about to say, '*Hell no*,' regardless of the fact that he sort of respects the fact that the reporter actually *asked*, when Ellie pulls back to look at her.

"You look like Maria," Ellie says. "Only your hair's not silver like hers."

"My name's Maria too," the reporter replies with a kind smile. Her eyes dart to Oliver and then Felicity, like she's trying to ensure she's not overstepping her bounds.

"It's a pretty name," Ellie says. "I like my Maria. Momma says she says nice things about Daddy. Sometimes people don't and it makes her sad."

Oliver's brow furrows at that, looking down at Ellie, trying to read between the lines of what she's saying, but he doesn't have enough information, not by a long shot. It doesn't help that he doesn't know this woman at all, doesn't recognize her in the least, although he feels

infinitely better seeing the recognition in Ellie's eyes.

"What newspaper are you with?" Oliver asks the reporter.

"Glades Weekly," she replies with the kind of pride that only comes from hard work. "It's new. We had our first issue two months ago."

"I know it," Oliver tells her, watching her smile spread at the recognition. "You're Maria Escobar? The editor, right?"

"I am, and about a dozen other things too," she says with a self-aware laugh. "We're a small paper, but the Glades needed a community paper that speaks to what's going on there, a voice for the people."

Oliver raises an eyebrow. "And that voice wants to ask my three-year-old a question?"

"Well," Maria says with a shrug. "That voice still needs to sell ad space, Mr. Queen."

She has a point, and he respects her honesty. But more than that, he wasn't lying when he'd said he knew her paper. Felicity had brought the very first issue down to the foundry and triumphantly tossed it in front of him, pointing at the headline with a bright red-painted nail: *Arrow Saves Six Lives, Police Funds Grossly Misused In Pursuit Of Hero*.

"Ask your question, Ms. Escobar," Oliver says, and the woman's eyes widen in delight. "But I'm going to stop her from answering if I don't like it."

"Of course," Maria demures, before turning to Ellie. To her credit, the way she softens is visible as she speaks to the little girl. "You seem to love your daddy very much."

Ellie lights up at the comment and nods with great enthusiasm.

"He's the best daddy ever," she advises. Her tone is incredibly serious, like she recognizes the weight of a roomful of reporters' eyes on her. "And he keeps me safe and plays with me and lets me have ice cream sometimes."

Oliver chuckles at that - she really, *really* loves ice cream. Ellie looks at him as if for confirmation, and when he nods, she grins.

Maria smiles, charmed by Ellie's effortless show of adoration. "That's wonderful." She pauses, leaning a little closer, and Oliver braces

himself for what she's about to ask. "But you have another daddy too, don't you? This daddy isn't your real daddy, right?"

Oliver freezes, fighting to keep his face still. He can't tell Ellie *not* to answer. Maria's stayed true to her word and kept the question gentle, but more importantly if he intervenes, it would undermine everything he's done here. That doesn't change the fact that she's *three* and that he has no idea what she's about to say.

He holds his breath.

Ellie's brows draw together in consternation. After a moment, she says, "I had a daddy before." She pats Oliver's chest. "But *this* is daddy too. And maybe he's not *really* my daddy yet, but he will be someday."

Relief nearly makes him collapse and the sigh Oliver lets out is only made louder by the fact that Felicity *and* his mother let out heavy exhales at the same moment. The reporter looks at them strangely and Oliver can't really blame her for that considering she doesn't realize Ellie just gave her *best possible answer ever*, but he doesn't stop to focus on that. Instead he kisses Ellie's temple and slides an arm around Felicity's waist. He pulls her flush against him as she steps closer, fitting so perfectly into his side it's hard to believe.

It's *freeing*, being with them like this, in front of the press - it's like he's telling everyone that this is *his* choice, this is his life and he's so incredibly happy with it that it almost seems a little unbelievable.

Felicity looks up at him, pride shining on her face.

Room full of reporters or not, that's a hard thing for him to look away from.

He's vaguely aware of the crowd shifting as Mark steps forward, announcing Moira will be answering a few questions as well. When she steps forward, some of the larger networks turn to her, pulling the spotlight away from them. The scandal of Ellie's existence seems to have fizzled out, turning out to be nowhere near the dramatic story they were all hoping to get.

"You know…" Maria ventures, pulling Oliver's attention back to her. She smiles, looking at Felicity. "I'd love to ask the two of *you* a few questions, too. An exclusive might be nice." Oliver can't help the bark of laughter at her brazenness, but Maria is undeterred. "There's a lot of voters in the Glades who aren't necessarily leaning in your mother's direction. I'm sure you understand why. Having a nice piece about

your family might sway a few minds *and* gain me some advertisers."

Her honest really is so damn refreshing, but that doesn't mean he's going to be sitting down to tell her his life story any time soon.

"What's your circulation again?" Oliver asks, raising an eyebrow at her, both of them well aware that her readership likely isn't *that* impressive yet. "CNN is right there."

"Quality over quantity," Maria replies. "How many CNN viewers are voters in Starling City? Every one of my readers lives right here."

She's not entirely wrong, and if Ellie is to be believed, she might be an ally in the press for the Arrow in the future. *Maybe*. It's enough to give him pause anyhow.

"I'll consider it," he allows, not missing the blatant surprise on Felicity's face at his response.

"Channel 52 would be thrilled to have a sit-down with you two on camera, you know," chimes in a nearby reporter he vaguely recognizes from the nightly news. "If you've got things to say, you'll reach more locals on tv than you will in any paper. And, let's be honest, you've both got a face made for television."

Maria huffs, turning on the other reporter with a glare just as their colleagues - competitors, really - start muscling in, making their own pitches for an exclusive. Oliver barely keeps himself from rolling his eyes, the underlying bickering that slowly grows louder starting to grate at his nerves as they try to one-up each other.

"They're very loud, daddy," Ellie says, wrinkling her little nose in distaste.

"Yes they are," he replies just as Sara says, "Ollie," in a tone he more than recognizes from where she and Diggle stand behind them.

Oliver leans back to hear her as she steps closer, dropping her voice. Her eyes dart around the room, surveying for threats even as she speaks. A wave of gratitude and awe fills his chest - it's a rare person who would accept the last few days as graciously as she has, including going from girlfriend to bodyguard for her ex-boyfriend, his daughter and his daughter's mother in the space of forty-eight hours.

Whatever their relationship might be, he will always be tremendously grateful for Sara's presence in his life.

"My father called," Sara says in a hushed voice. "SCPD is watching the news." Oliver tenses, already know where she's going with this. "If you don't want them showing up here to follow up on the bugging allegations, we need to get back to the manor." She meets his eyes to convey the urgency. "*Now*."

He definitely does *not* want them showing up to investigate that in the middle of a press conference. Felicity's tiny, "Oh," tells him she more than agrees.

"Excuse us," Oliver says, his hand slipping down to grab Felicity's, tugging her along with him. "If you all have more questions, you can run them through Mark. We have other obligations we need to see to. Thank you for your time, everyone." As an afterthought, he says with a nod, "Maria, I'll give you a call."

There's a disgruntled murmur throughout the mass of reporters, but Oliver ignores it, twining his fingers through Felicity's. He slides his thumb gently along the curve of hers as he leads the way toward his mother.

"Pardon us," Oliver says with a disingenuous smile toward the CNN camera before leaning in to speak lowly to his mother. "We need to leave. The police are investigating the bugging and they want to talk to us immediately. We can't have them *here*."

She doesn't even look at him, but smiles tightly toward the reporters and nods as she soaks in his words.

"Well then," Moira announces with a regal air. "We have a pressing engagement to get to. Mark, if you'll stay behind to wrap things up? I'd be more than happy to schedule an interview in the near future. Thank you all so much for coming today. It means a great deal to me and I'm grateful for the support so many have offered as my family has come under attack."

Moira's wave is appropriately resplendent as she ignores the questions being lobbed at them while they hurry to the exit. When the cool morning air touches their face and daylight floods their vision, they all let out a collective sigh of relief. The doors close behind them, cutting off the sound of Mark addressing the reporters' lingering questions.

"That went well… ish," Felicity says. "I think it did anyhow. Did it?"

"It went fine," Oliver confirms opening the car door and putting Ellie

on the seat. "I'm not sure we could have expected any better."

"True," Felicity replies and Oliver cups her elbow, pulling her closer to him to make room for Moira to slide in next. Oliver nods to Diggle for him to go next as Sara and Laurel climb into the front of the car. Felicity pats his chest, right over his heart. "You did a great job."

"Thank you." Oliver smiles. "Let's get home."

He makes room for Felicity to get in before following suit. Ellie's scurries into his lap, happily humming the theme song to Rascal the Raccoon under her breath. It will never cease to amaze him how quickly she bounces back, how easily she copes with all of the chaos in her life.

The second he closes the door behind him, Moira says, "Alderman Blood's people *will* hit back."

"Not if the police can find a link between him and the cameras," Oliver points out.

"That's a big 'if,' Oliver," Moira replies. "The local police are not exactly known for their investigative work." She raises her eyebrows for emphasis. "Which is something that usually benefits you a great deal."

"They'll find it if we make sure they find it," Felicity says, earning everyone's attention. "We could… plant some bread crumbs here and there… steer their attention the right way."

"I can't hear this," Laurel says, shaking her head as she turns to face forward in the front seat. "I'm going to *pretend* you aren't talking about planting evidence because otherwise it would put me in a very uncomfortable position right now."

"Not planting," Felicity says, "*exactly*. More like… placing a giant blinking neon arrow over it saying 'Look Here'." She glances at Oliver. "No pun intended about the arrow bit."

He chuckles, reaching over to touch her knee, rubbing his thumb in a gentle circle against her soft skin. Her legs are bare; it's both intimate and comforting. When she shifts closer to him, ducking her head to hide the flush creeping across her chest, he knows she feels it too.

"We'll talk more on the way to the manor," Oliver says. "For now, we need to get home. And we need to do it before we have any visitors

there."

Ultimately, they get there pretty quickly. They beat Captain Lance there, but getting there before *any* visitors?

Well… that might have been too much to ask.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Felicity is almost at ease by the time they reach the manor. For the first time in what feels like weeks - really, it's only been days, and she knows that, but *weeks* fits so much better considering how much has happened - she lets herself feel cautiously optimistic. Oliver absently rubs his hand over her back as they listen to Ellie's plans with her fairies, putting her even more at ease, especially when she rests her hand on his leg and he leans into her.

Things went well, at least as well as any of them could have possibly expected. They'd come away from the press conference with everything leaning in their favor. The media seemed to have bought every word that was said and, while Oliver had done as well as she'd known he would, Ellie had played her part so beautifully it might as well have been scripted.

So, at least *some* things outside of their control seem to be going well. And the closer they get to home, the more Felicity lets herself relax, falling into an amusing discussion about the ins and outs of fairy politics according to her daughter. Even the inevitable police interview coming up can't break through the little bubble of peace they find themselves in.

That all comes to a screeching halt, though, when they pull through the gates to Queen Manor and roll to a stop under the porte-cochère. Because there are items waiting on the front stoop. Very, very telling items.

Felicity physically *feels* the blood draining from her face.

"Oh… oh god, *no*," she says, shaking her head. "Oooh god, this is terrible. Oliver, we need to leave. Now. Immediately. Right now."

"What?" Oliver asks, his whole frame stiffening, instantly tugging Ellie closer to his chest protectively. "What's wrong?"

His eyes barely skate over the items before he looks around, seeking something far more threatening than the pink rhinestone-covered luggage sitting neatly in front of the entrance to the manor. He doesn't get it. He doesn't *know* what those represent. He cannot possibly

appreciate what is waiting for them inside or the fact that she so, so does not have the mental capacity to handle this right now.

Felicity ignores him, looking at Sara. "We have to go. Can we go?"

Sara just raises an eyebrow, making a face at her in the mirror, her brows knitting together in confusion - probably because she's already done a sweep, she's already checked in, she's well aware that the area is actually very safe, and there's no reason to leave.

They're all so *wrong*. This is so bad on so many levels Felicity can't even begin to explain it. And what's worse is she *knows* that Oliver won't see this for what it is, won't really get why the sight of those bags has her on the verge of a panic attack.

There is no way in which her mother will make this whole mess better.

None.

"Felicity…" A frown is fixed on Oliver's face as he meets Sara's eyes before looking back at Felicity, but her eyes are still glued on the luggage. "Whose are those? Who's here?"

Ellie sits up, straining her neck to see what they're talking about. The instant she sees the luggage, delight lights up her face like a Christmas tree, and the ramifications of *that* hit Felicity like a Mack truck.

"Gramma!" Ellie squeals, bouncing with excitement. Oliver's eyebrows shoot up, mouthing the words, '*Your Mom?'* at Felicity as Ellie glances back at her, pointing at the bags. "Momma, Gramma's here!"

The only response Felicity can manage is a nod with a strangled laugh that lodges itself in the back of her throat. She buries her face in her hands. She can't even *begin* to process how this is going to play out. Her mother is… well, she's her mother, and saying she's dramatic is like saying fire burns. In fact, her presence is very much like throwing gasoline on a fire, one you're trying to let die.

Since the second she'd seen her mother's face lighting up her phone that morning, Felicity had hoped that the press conference would blow things over and that the news that Ellie was in fact not *really* her child might magically implant into her mother's head that there was no reason to call, or show up, or do *anything*… but she'd known that was too much to ask. If she'd let herself really think things through instead of burying her head in the sand, Felicity might've even *planned*

something for it.

But she didn't, because the thought of dealing with that had been too much. It *still* is.

So, of course, naturally it shows up on her doorstep.

Felicity lets out a wail-laced groan.

"Hey, we can deal with this," Oliver says softly. "We managed the press. I'm sure we can manage your mother."

She can only laugh at that because it's said with the sort of certainty stated by someone who has never met her mother.

"Felicity-" he starts again.

"How are we going to explain Ellie to her, Oliver?" she interrupts, the words laced with a mania she can't even hope to control. "What actual relative's kid do I have custody of? My cousin Stacy," Felicity says with air quotes, emphasizing the paper trail she'd laid the second they'd come up with the plan for the press, "who is in upstate New York for her third stint in rehab might work for the press and the police, but not my mother. And how do we keep Ellie from making it *incredibly clear* that she knows my mom? Asking her to keep quiet in front of reporters is one thing, but pretending she doesn't know her grandmother?"

"We… uh…" Oliver responds, his mouth working soundlessly as he tries to come up with something. But there's nothing, because her mother doesn't know *any of it*. She only knows Felicity had a job at QC, not that she knew Oliver, and definitely not that she's secretly working with the bow-wielding Starling City vigilante.

As the weight of what's very likely going to happen when they go inside starts hitting him, Oliver pales slightly. Really, it's probably mostly because of the insane way she's staring at him, like he just told her he's getting up in front of the cameras to publically declare himself the Arrow, but still. He's paling. *Good*, he needs to appreciate how *dire* this is.

Oliver shrugs. "Well, we… we could…"

"You tell her the truth."

Moira.

Felicity damn near gives herself whiplash with how quickly her head snaps up to meet her future mother-in-law's gaze. She can't *possibly* have heard her correctly.

Felicity blinks. "Did you honestly just suggest I tell my mother that my future child was sent back in time to be protected by me and her future father who is actually a secret superhero?"

Her voice echoes through the limo cabin, the words so sharply incredulous it makes Diggle and Laurel wince, only emphasizing Oliver's visible reaction to the word 'superhero.'

"I'm not a…" he starts, honestly bashful at her declaration, which is *ridiculous*. It's not even a thing he can argue at this point. Honestly, he fights crime in a mask, she's pretty sure that's in the definition. A sketch of The Arrow might as well be next to the word superhero in the dictionary.

But that is so not the point right now, because his mother just suggested the most outrageous…

"I did," Moira confirms.

"That is a *terrible* idea," Felicity declares, nearly choking on the words. She looks around the limo for anyone to back her up. "You guys know this is a terrible idea, right? Like invading Russia in winter levels of terrible. Or maybe trusting Malcolm Merlyn about anything ever."

Moira winces at that, her jaw tightening as Sara bites back a delighted grin. Alright, maybe not the most appropriate comparison ever, but it's *up there*.

"I'm not sure we have much of a choice," Laurel points out.

"No, no, we do," Felicity counters. "We really do. We have gas, right? Turn the car around and *go*. No mom, no problem. Central City's not that far, right? I hear their housing market is really good right now."

"Hey," Oliver says, turning to face her. He situates Ellie between them, his hand finding Felicity's back again. She looks at him, ready to launch into all the positives of buying a house in Central City *right now*, but he cuts her off with a soft, "Felicity, *relax*."

His voice is low and only for her. He ducks his head to catch her eyes as he rubs comforting patterns against her back… except this time it isn't helping. If anything, it only makes the panic *grow* because it's not

just the whole time traveling thing, or that she has a daughter all of a sudden. It's also that in the space of a few days, she and Oliver have gone from something really platonic to something really not-platonic.

Before she can tell him any of that though, Laurel turns in the front seat to look back at them.

"What happens with the press if your mother doesn't back our story?" she prods. "What if she says she thinks Ellie is actually yours? Or worse, what if she says she's never seen her before and she doesn't have any idea what you're talking about, and that Ellie isn't a relative? We can't afford the police digging around into that."

God, Felicity *really hates logic*, but Laurel's right. She can fake a paper trail like nobody else, but if they investigated at all, they might take Ellie away. The thought of that happening is like a swift kick to the gut, quickly followed by another because if they took her away, who would protect her from Zoom? The thought of him getting through this time, of taking her because nobody is there to stop him…

They need her mother's support. Or, at the very least, they need her not to contest what they're saying.

Felicity knows this, but that doesn't make it any easier to accept.

It's only when Oliver whispers, "Breathe, Felicity," that she realizes she hasn't been. Felicity sucks in a ragged gasp and the gentle smile he shoots her keeps her bids for air from coming a little too quickly.

"So how do we do this?" she asks, her voice unsteady as she looks around the limo. "Not just in a 'what words do we say' kind of way, but how do we convince her time travel is an actual thing that exists outside of the Doctor Who marathons I've made her sit through?"

"Together," Oliver immediately replies, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. "You're not doing this alone."

"You're not alone, momma," Ellie pipes in, gazing up at her with earnest eyes. They're so big and blue and she looks so much like Oliver for a split second that Felicity lets out a slightly astonished chuckle. She moves without thinking to smooth her hand over Ellie's hair. She thinks it's to reassure her daughter before realizing it's mostly for herself. Because Ellie's right, she's not alone and she'll never be alone again.

That thought swirls through her head, wrapping around her, filling

her. Her mother will always be her family, yes, but this right here, this is *her* family, the family *she* made. And they'll be there at her side, the entire time.

"And Ellie's pretty convincing," Oliver adds with a little smile. "It's hard not to look at her and see you. Your mom would know either way." Felicity looks at him - she couldn't lie even if she wanted to - and he levels her with a steady look. "It'll be fine."

She hopes with everything in her that he's right.

He nods, like he's reading her thoughts, and it makes her smile. And just like that, the tension bubble in her chest bursts.

"Did she bring Pop-Pop?" Ellie asks, buzzing with excitement again. "Do you think she brought me presents? Can she do my nails, Momma?"

"Uh…"

She can't even begin to process that, much less *answer*. Having Oliver and Ellie with her might *help*, but she's so not ready to face the reality of her mother bonding with her future daughter. Nope, not yet.

One thing at a time.

"How about we give it a bit, okay?" Felicity replies. Ellie's grin instantly melts into a pout, her body deflating as she slouches back against the leather. "You can see her in a while, but Daddy and I want to talk to her first."

"I'd like to be there as well," Moira chimes in. Felicity closes her eyes. So much for one thing at a time. Moira and her mother in the same room? And to say nothing of *Oliver* meeting her mother? Oh, she is *so* unprepared for this. "One new grandmother to another, I'm in a unique position to relate to her."

And *that* may be the most ridiculous notion Felicity has ever heard. Not that there isn't common ground between them on this particular issue, but the idea that *Moira Queen* and *Donna Smoak* have something to relate to each other over… Well, Felicity has no idea how to make sense of that. They're possibly the most opposite women she can imagine.

But there's also nothing she can say that won't come out sounding a little too rude, like, '*Hell no.*'

"Okay then," Oliver says. He nods toward Ellie. "Digg, Sara, can you…"

"We've got her," Diggle agrees.

"If *anything* happens…" Oliver starts.

"We can protect her, Ollie," Sara says, cutting him off. "Anything happens and she'll scream, we'll fight, you'll hear it. It's not like we're going anywhere." Felicity can see Oliver biting the tip of his tongue at her irreverent words, all of them knowing she's not *really* being flippant, but that she's still making a point. Sara gives him a look. "We'll be with her the entire time."

He fidgets a bit. Being away from Ellie isn't ideal - in fact, it makes Felicity's stomach feel really, really hot - but they can't be with her around the clock, and even if they are with her, it doesn't change the danger she's in. She's going to need eyes on her constantly, and not just Moira - or god forbid, Donna - but people who know how to protect her, and they'll need help with that. If it's not Oliver, then it has to be Digg or Sara. It's an understanding that resonates with everyone in the limo. Felicity's suddenly so grateful for all of them she almost starts crying. They might've been able to do this on their own, but with their friends there to help them, it's easier. And maybe even a little safer.

Oliver nods and looks at the little girl. "Ellie, you're going to stay with Diggle and Sara for a bit, okay?"

Maybe it's because they're back at Queen Manor or maybe it's just because she's three and has all of the fickleness that goes along with her age, but Ellie takes to this notion with a lot more ease than she did at the press conference, shrugging a little in reply.

"Is Sara here to play with?" Ellie asks, looking toward Digg.

"She's right there, kiddo," he replies, nodding toward the driver's seat.

"Not *that* Sara, silly," Ellie huffs, like he's trying her patience. "Your Sara."

"My…" Diggle starts, his eyes bugging out. "*My* Sara?"

"Yeah," Ellie agrees, completely missing how much she's just floored him. "I wanna show her the fairy castle. She can be my vice president!"

Diggle pauses, staring at Ellie with a heaviness Felicity's never seen on his face before. "Sara's… my daughter?"

"Uh huh," Ellie confirms. "She's my bestest friend *ever*."

Diggle clearly has no idea how to handle that, or how to respond, but the way his eyes dart toward her and Oliver tell her that she was right. He already knew.

"How far along is Lyla?" Felicity asks.

Diggle huffs out an incredulous laugh, already confirming what Felicity suspected without having to say anything as wonder skates over his features.

"Not very," he finally replies. "She's due this Fall. We weren't telling anyone yet."

"Ellie, how old is Little Sara?" Oliver asks.

"Seven," Ellie replies.

"Does she have any brothers or sisters?" Felicity prods, knowing full well that asking these kinds of questions is probably a terrible idea. No, not probably, definitely, because it has the potential to change so much. But they've *already* changed things, haven't they? Ellie just being here has changed things. Right?

"Nope," Ellie replies. She sits up taller, crawling onto Oliver's lap to look out the window. Ellie presses her fingertips to the glass as she eyes her grandmother's distinctive luggage. "But I'm *like* her sister. She says so."

Ellie's three-and-a-half… they have four years - more or less - until they have her. Something about that makes it more firm, more *real*, like she can see the path in front of her.

And it shoots a thrill straight through her.

Oliver's of the same mind, his eyes intent as he asks, "When is your birthday, Ellie?"

"The seventeenth," she replies with proud flourish.

"Of what?" Felicity asks.

"I dunno." Ellie shrugs. "Just the seventeenth." She spins to face

Felicity again. "Why can't I go see Gramma?"

The kid can change subjects like nothing Felicity's ever seen before, and that's saying something considering it's *her* thinking that.

"It's…" she starts, but the words fail her pretty quickly. "It's complicated. Just let me and Oliv- uh… *Daddy* talk to her first, okay?"

Ellie huffs. "Fine."

"I have an idea," Oliver says, tugging on Ellie's sleeve. "Why don't you take Uncle Digg and Aunt Sara to the fairy castle?"

Ellie perks up visibly at that, letting out an exuberant, "Yeah!" before she's scrambling off Oliver's lap.

Diggle - who'd been staring at the floor with a soft smile on his face - looks up with raised eyebrows, and Oliver says, "It's a treehouse in the backyard. It'll give her something to do that's close, but out of the way."

"Come on, Uncle Digg!" Ellie grabs his hand, wrapping hers around one of his fingers to tug him to the door. "It's the *best* and then you can tell Sara about it, 'cause she's gonna *love* it." Ellie pulls on him like she could actually have the strength to move him. He's so obviously amused by her excitement that he goes along with it, scooting along the seat toward the door.

"Have fun," Felicity says, feeling the strangest urge to follow them. For a split second, everything else doesn't matter all that much - her mother being there, the press conference, time travel, even Zoom to an extent, because she's suddenly just a mom leaving her kid with a babysitter for the first time. She wants to go with them, to make sure it is safe, that things go well. Is this what it's like for all parents? Or are her nerves owing entirely to Zoom's looming threat? It's probably a little bit of both. "And be good. And listen to them, okay?"

"Uh huh," Ellie replies without even looking back as Diggle opens the door. Ellie climbs out first, a bundle of excitement as everyone follows suit. When Sara doesn't get out right away though, Ellie slips past Felicity and Oliver to yell into the car, "Come *on*, Big Sara!"

Sara chuckles. "I'm coming, munchkin." She gets out, rounding the limo, and when she reaches them, Ellie immediately grabs her hand too, pulling them both in the direction of her beloved treehouse.

Felicity must have a look on her face because Oliver chuckles, his hand finding her lower back, but she only has eyes for her daughter.

"Bye, Ellie," Felicity calls out, trying not to feel affronted when all she gets in return is a distracted "Yeah, bye, Momma," in reply without so much as a backwards glance.

That hurts. Why does that hurt? How ridiculous is that?

"She'll be fine," Oliver says.

"I know," Felicity replies. "It's just…"

Moira steps up next to them. "You'll find that when your children are secure in your presence - when they take for granted that you will be there for them, a permanent fixture in their lives - they can be more dismissive." The older woman has a soft smile on her face as she touches Felicity's arm. "It might not seem like it at the moment, Felicity, but that's a good thing. In spite of everything going on in her life, she doesn't worry about you being there for her. The thought wouldn't even occur to her."

The words have the impact Felicity's pretty sure they're meant to, and she's returning Moira's smile before she knows what she's doing. They don't lessen the sting of Ellie's abrupt departure in the least, but the truth behind Moira's words is warming. Thinking about it *that* way gives it a whole new meaning, a meaning that has a lot of weight, a meaning that illustrates the happy and safe life she and Oliver manage to build for Ellie in the future.

Still, as distracted as she is by those thoughts, she doesn't miss the look between Oliver and his mother. It's undeniable that things had been tense between them before Ellie's sudden appearance in their lives. Moira's secrets and lies - more importantly, the way they'd impacted Oliver and Thea - had made their relationship uneasy at best and contentious at worst. But Ellie… Ellie has changed a lot of relationships, not just hers and Oliver's, but his with his mother. There's a newfound understanding between them and a measure of wary respect that Felicity's pretty certain has never been there before.

Moira purses her lips, glancing down at her phone. A sad, heavy look suddenly makes her seem years older, and for an instant, Felicity wonders what message she's gotten, until she realizes the screen is blank. It's not about what someone's said to her. That look of total despair is about what someone *hasn't* said.

"You still haven't heard from her?" Oliver ventures. The cautiously hopeful tone in his voice physically pains Felicity because she already knows the answer, and so does he. He just wishes he didn't.

Moira's stoic mask slips back in place as she puts her phone away with a simple, "No."

"I thought maybe after the press conference..." Oliver notes, voice drifting off a little toward the end.

"As did I," Moira confirms. "But your sister inherited my stubbornness, I'm afraid. She'll find her way home. In her own time. Until then we need to respect her need for space."

Oliver doesn't agree. Felicity can see this instantly. She watches as his throat works, adam's apple bobbing as he swallows hard, the muscles in his chiseled jaw visibly tightening. There's nothing she can say to make this better for him. All she can do is lend her silent support. So she does, letting her hand settle on his bicep, squeezing gently. It earns her a softer look, pulling him back to the present and he pushes aside his concerns for his sister for the moment.

"Come on," Oliver says, his hand finding the curve of Felicity's elbow. "Let's go meet your mom and sort this out."

Right.

Felicity makes a noise somewhere between a groan and a whine that's the opposite of flattering, prompting an amused smile from Oliver.

"I think I'll just wait for my dad," Laurel says, pointing awkwardly at the driveway. "I'll be at the gate."

"Okay," Oliver agrees, barely sparing her a glance where she walks away.

It's pretty amazing how much of an afterthought she seems to be to Oliver now, considering what Felicity had thought about them barely a few days ago. His words from yesterday morning come back to her. She'd believed him then, because she *knew* he was telling her the truth as he believed it, but seeing their interaction now gives Felicity a whole new way to define them.

They are truly and completely done, a footnote in his past.

It actually makes Felicity wonder for a second what has made the

other woman offer her support, but she's also not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. The press conference wouldn't have gone off nearly as well without her help. Who knew she'd one day need someone with so much expertise in family law?

"Mom?" Oliver asks, breaking through Felicity's thoughts as he urges her to the front door.

"Yes," Moira says, agreeing to his unspoken question with a nod, sweeping ahead of them with the kind of poise that will probably always have Felicity doing a double-take. Her back is straight, her hair perfectly coiffed, every inch of her put together in a way that seems supernatural. She doesn't even look like she's been in the car - do her clothes not wrinkle? Does she just scare the wrinkles off? Is that a thing? Felicity looks down at her own rumpled dress and tries in vain to brush the fabric so it lies flat, but she obviously doesn't share Moira's superpowers. How much of the rumple is from her emotions or just sitting, Felicity's not sure, but she's decidedly unkempt in comparison.

"I just…" Felicity starts, waving her hand. Oliver snatches it mid-air, giving her a reassuring smile. It doesn't work. "I want to apologize ahead of time for what's about to happen."

"It's your mom, honey," Oliver replies immediately - and *wow*, him calling her honey is a thing she might never be used to. "She's family. I'm sure it won't be that bad."

Felicity snorts. *Oh*, he has no idea. She's not sure that she can fully explain her mother - to be honest, she sort of defies description - but Felicity doesn't get the chance to try as the front door suddenly swings open, followed by a shrill shriek that shatters the quiet air.

Never let it be said that Donna Smoak doesn't know how to make an entrance.

Felicity winces, catching sight of an overwhelmed-looking Raisa right behind where Donna waves her hands in the air, bouncing on her five-inch platform neon pink heels that only emphasize the skintight dress she wears. It's never ceased to amaze Felicity how her mother can breathe in those things and she absently wonders if it's possible she'll just pass out and wake up, thinking this was all a dream…

She's not that lucky.

It takes Donna all of five seconds to realize how *loud* she is before she

slaps her hands over her mouth, eyes darting towards a startled Moira.

"Mom…" Felicity breathes, sounding as tired as she already feels. "What are you doing here?"

"Felicity Meghan Smoak!" Donna chastises, her hands slapping her thighs with a loud smack as she closes the distance between them. "Did you really think you could keep this from me?"

"Mom, whatever you think is going on-"

"I know exactly what's going on," Donna says, and Felicity almost believes her because she's staring at her like she *does* know, but that doesn't stop Felicity from muttering under her breath, "Oh, I can pretty much guarantee that you don't."

And then her mother glances at Oliver.

The change is instantaneous as Donna pauses, doing a rather blatant size-up of him, something that makes Oliver do his own double-take. And he thought he knew what he was walking into… Before Felicity can do or say anything, Donna blushes - *of course* she blushes - before letting out a breathy little laugh, a manicured hand settling against her own neck.

Her mother… there's no preparing anyone for her mother. Ever.

"Mom, this is Oliver…"

"Queen," she fills in, her grin turning brilliant. "Hello."

"Hi," Oliver replies, barely able to contain a grin - much to Felicity's chagrin - as he holds out his hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Miss Smoak."

"Oh no, please. Donna. Call me Donna."

"Alright. Donna," Oliver says in a way that makes her mother blush even more, quickly followed by a little giggle that grates right against Felicity's nerves.

"*Mom*."

"Yes?" Donna asks, looking back toward her daughter. "Felicity."

"How did you even get in here?" Felicity asks. Because, really, their security is supposed to be excellent and what good are they if they

can't keep out one middle-aged cocktail waitress in five-inch heels? It's not like she'd hopped the fence.

"Raisa let me in, of course," Donna says like it's obvious, seeming wholly affronted that this is even a question. "Well, after security verified who I was, anyhow. I'm *your mother,* Felicity, despite the fact that you're apparently too busy to call or visit or inform me about anything going on in your life."

Felicity closes her eyes. "Mom, I swear on the soul of the first computer I ever built that this is not whatever you think it is."

"So you aren't dating Oliver Queen?" Donna asks, eyes darting down to their hands where Felicity is holding onto Oliver with a vise-grip. "And you aren't currently raising a three-year-old little girl who looks just like you did when you were a baby?" Dread tightens Felicity's chest. "I dug out your baby book the second I saw those pictures, just so I could bring it with me. I might not have a fancy college degree, but I can still put *some* things together, honey."

"You brought her baby book?" Oliver asks, looking pleasantly amused rather than absolutely horrified, which he should on her behalf, in Felicity's very important opinion. And the fact that *that* was what he gleaned from the entire thing is a whole new annoyance level.

"Mom…" Felicity's mouth hangs open, but the words… there are no words. When Donna raises her eyebrows expectantly, a nervous laugh bubbles out of her. "Mom, this isn't…"

"What I believe Felicity means to say, Ms. Smoak, is that the driveway is not the setting for such a delicate conversation," Moira intercedes. Felicity shoots her a desperately grateful look, but Moira's still focused on Donna. "It's a lovely day. Might I suggest we use the sunroom to continue this discussion while Raisa finds a suitable room for your luggage?"

"Oh, that's… no, Mrs. Queen," Donna says, looking off-kilter for the first time in Felicity's memory. "I just came here straight from the airport, I wasn't expecting… I was just going to stay at Felicity's, I couldn't possibly impose…"

"She really *can't* possibly impose," Felicity says, nodding a little too manically. "I'll get my key for you, mom."

"Nonsense," Moira says, waving off Felicity's objections like they're completely unworthy of consideration. "We have plenty of rooms to

spare and there's a great deal to discuss. Besides, we wouldn't want the press hounding your mother on our account." She smiles at Donna, and it appears entirely genuine. "It's safer here."

"But…"

She's not *wrong*, and Felicity knows this… but Queen matriarch could at least have the decency to have a terrible argument. It feels completely unfair otherwise.

"Come," Moira says with a commanding grace only she can wield, taking Donna by the elbow to guide them toward the house. "Can I get you a drink?"

"*I'd* love a drink," Felicity whispers, watching as her mother walks into Queen Manor with Moira Queen at her side. How exactly has this became her life? "Or five."

"Later," Oliver promises with a chuckle, pressing a kiss into her hair. "Let's get through this first. It's going to be fine. Your mom is… colorful."

Felicity snorts and looks up at him in disbelief. Yes, her mother is *colorful*, and that's also kind of the understatement of the year.

"It'll be *fine*," Oliver repeats, cupping her face with his free hand. "You aren't alone in this. *We* aren't alone in this. It'll be okay, Felicity. Really."

He sounds so confident and *sure*, so much so that she actually believes him.

Felicity narrows her eyes playfully, leaning into him as she asks, "Who are you and what have done with my Oliver Queen?"

"I'm still your Oliver," he replies softly, just for her ears. His lips pull up in a growing smile as they stare at each other. "There's just a new light at the end of the tunnel."

Felicity's heart swells with emotion at that - it's her, and Ellie; it's *them*. She steps closer, lacing her fingers through the hand she's holding while her other slides up his chest. She slips her fingers between the buttons of his shirt until she reaches the collar. Oliver's eyes slip shut for a second, his jaw clenching. In a move that shouldn't affect them as much as it does, Felicity pushes her hand inside the collar of his shirt to cup his neck. When his breathing stutters, her

stomach drops. He's so *sensitive* to her touch.

His calloused thumb strokes her cheek, those hypnotic blue eyes of his pinning her in place. He's definitely not the only one so affected that world around them disappears, leaving just them in their own little bubble.

And because her brain is her brain, she immediately wonders how long it will last. They just can't catch a break…

"We'll be fine," Oliver says, reading her like an open book.

"You sound so sure," Felicity whispers. His eyes drop to her mouth, his hand moving to cup her jaw, his thumb drifting along the bottom edge of her lip. The intensity in his gaze leaves her dizzy, breathless, like the connection between them is an actual tangible thing. Felicity swallows, and his pupils widen with new intent. "Where can I get some of that certainty?"

"Well," he says, his voice low as he meets her eyes again. A warm flush creeps over her chest, crawling up her neck. It definitely doesn't escape her attention that he's just as flushed. "I learned it from you."

Felicity cannot explain why that has her insides positively melting.

"Oh," she manages.

"So…" Oliver leans in even closer, his thumb pressing more fully on her bottom lip now, in a way that makes her eyes flutter shut as she loses herself in that simple sensation.

She's not sure if it's because of what happened last night, or because they faced yet another life or death situation that morning, or what, but the heat that's slowly growing inside her is becoming a little too insistent. As in hard-to-ignore insistent. As in she's completely forgotten about everything else around her except for the way Oliver is touching her in that quiet moment. It's like a tidal wave, rising slowly but with the intensity of the damn sun, and she's suddenly incredibly aware of every inch of him pressed against her.

Oliver's forehead brushes against hers as he whispers, "Maybe we'll have to learn it together."

Oh, he is so not talking about whatever the hell they were talking about.

"That sounds… good," Felicity breathes, tilting her face to his, for at least *one* kiss…

"*Ahem.*"

Reality comes crashing back and they jump, both of them stepping apart, their other hands still laced together as they look toward the noise.

Moira and Donna stand with identical disbelieving looks on their faces in the doorway to the house. Felicity's sure they weren't doing anything *that* bad, but the way her mother is looking at her, she might as well have been. She blushes - which must be quite the sight since she was already flushed to begin with - and smiles tightly as she says, "Hi," in an abnormally high voice.

Oliver squeezes her hand.

"If we might have a moment of your time?" Moira asks, completely failing at keeping a note of amusement out of her voice.

The blush works its way down Felicity's neck and she bites her lip with a nod, looking down at her feet. She steps closer to Oliver who wraps his arm around her waist and both of them move to join their mothers for the most surreal conversation in history.

"Raisa," Moira says. "You'll have someone see to Ms. Smoak's bags, won't you?"

"Of course, Mrs. Queen," Raisa nods. As Felicity and Oliver pass, she sends them a wink that makes Oliver duck his head with a chuckle.

"It's Donna, please," Felicity hears her mother say.

"And you must call me Moira, of course," Oliver's mother replies, leaning in conspiratorially… which takes on a whole new meaning considering it's *Moira Queen,* actual monarch reigning over conspirators.

The simple exchange only serves to remind Felicity of what they're walking into while simultaneously intensifying her desire to just melt into the pavement. Oh god, she so doesn't want to do this. She *can't* do this. A heady rush of fight-or-flight surges through her and she almost stops right there, almost grabs Oliver and makes a run for it.

Oliver is so in tune with her, though, so very keenly aware - as if he's

keyed right into her every emotion - that he strokes his thumb against her side and makes a quiet hushing noise designed specifically to calm her nerves. It shouldn't work, because it didn't work a second ago, but now… now he's Oliver - *her* Oliver - and his reassurance works its way through her. Her muscles slowly uncoil, her lungs loosening, letting her take an unhindered breath.

He said things will be fine. And she believes him.

"If you're hungry, I would be happy to have Raisa prepare a light snack," Moira offers, leading Donna through the house to a sitting room Felicity hasn't seen before.

Queen Manor has more rooms than Felicity has ever bothered to take note of. It's an endless maze of hallways with rich displays of… well, the fact that the inhabitants are rich, frankly. It's never done much to impress Felicity, but her mother is suitably distracted by the display of wealth as they make their way through the house.

It's only at her mother's near stumble as she recognizes a Renior in the hall that Felicity realizes Moira picked the sunroom for a very specific reason. It will never cease to amaze Felicity just how conniving she is, how every single move is calculated to the goal she wants. She uses every means she has at her disposal, and money is just one of the many tools at her fingertips. It's amazing. And just as frightening as the first time Felicity realized it.

Moira opens the doors to the sunroom. It has a spectacular view of the entire backyard, including the tree that houses Ellie's fairy castle. It's far in the distance, but Felicity still spots Diggle where he stands at the base, looking up - he's broader than Oliver, Felicity realizes; he probably took one look at the entrance and volunteered to stay on the ground. Felicity knows when Oliver catches a glimpse as well because his shoulders loosen some.

"You don't strike me as the whiskey type, Donna," Moira says with a smile. "A mimosa maybe? Or a nice riesling?"

For a split second, it all works. Donna Smoak is completely taken in by her surroundings. But she's a Vegas girl at heart and Felicity can *see* the moment she shrugs it all off and refocuses herself.

"No, thank you," Donna replies. "I think I'd prefer a clear head for this."

At that, her mother turns to stare down her daughter, leaving Moira

both surprised and maybe even a little impressed. It's obvious the Queen matriarch had underestimated her mother, which is easy to do. Donna Smoak projects a certain image, but she's so much more than that.

"You want to tell me why you thought you needed to keep my granddaughter from me?" Donna asks, her tone leaving no room for argument. Felicity moves to respond, but Donna cuts her off, leaving Felicity feeling like she's fifteen again. "You don't have any *troubled relatives* who can't care for their child, Felicity. Don't even try to feed me the line you fed the press."

"Uh…"

"Is she…" Donna steps closer, her voice lowering as she asks, "Is she Cooper's daughter, baby?"

"*What*?" Felicity asks, barely feeling Oliver stiffen slightly next to her as her heart plummets at the mention of Coop.

"Is that why you didn't tell me?" Donna continues, emotion coloring her tone as she follows that ludicrous train of thought. "Did you think I'd judge you? That I wouldn't accept her?"

"God, no, Mom," Felicity chokes out because, *wow*, that was not a question she'd been prepared for. At all. "Just… no."

Oliver's grip hasn't lessened any as he asks, "Who's Cooper?"

"He's… that's…" Felicity tenses, huffing in annoyance when the words don't come easily. They never do when it comes to that part of her history. There's too many raw nerves, too much guilt for his death that sits on her shoulders, that will *always* sit on her shoulders. "It's ancient history."

"That little girl looks about four," Donna notes, her eyes pinning Felicity in place. "Cooper died almost five years ago. You can see why I'd ask if Lily is his."

"Ellie," Felicity corrects, because that's *by far* the easiest part of any of this to address.

Donna blinks. "What?"

"Her name is Ellie… Elizabeth Dearden Queen. We lied to the press, you're right," Felicity admits. She takes a steadying breath, steeling

herself for the conversation to come. "And Mom, I'll tell you everything. I promise. But I think you're going to want to sit down first. Please."

It's probably the 'please' that does it. Donna reluctantly takes a seat on a large sofa, looking as out-of-place in her cocktail dress as Felicity can imagine. The impression is only heightened when Moira sits regally beside her. It's a study in contrast, watching their mothers.

"Mom, this is going to sound crazy," Felicity starts as Oliver pulls her over to the loveseat across from them, tugging her down to sit next to him. The instant they're settled, Felicity grabs his hand again, holding it between both of hers. She's one-hundred percent sure she wouldn't have been able to do this without him there, because what she's about to tell her… it's… Felicity shakes her head, sounding increasingly panicked as she says, "It *is* crazy, actually, and you're never going to believe me. Oliver, how the hell do we-"

"She's from the future," Oliver says, cutting her off.

Felicity's incredulous gaze snaps to Oliver before instantly snapping back to her mother. Donna's eyes go wide, her jaw dropping as she looks at Oliver, then Felicity, and finally Moira, like she's waiting for someone to laugh or confess it's a joke.

When none of them do, something in her closes off a bit and she sits back, withdrawing slightly. That has Felicity sitting forward, wanting to reach out and grab her mother's hand, to anchor her.

"It's true," Felicity adds, begging with her eyes for Donna to believe her. "I know it sounds nuts, like commit-these-people level of nuts, but I swear, Mom… I *swear* it's true."

"Felicity…" her mother starts with a warning tone and a shake of her head.

"The particle accelerator accident in Central City," Felicity blurts.

Donna starts at the non-sequitur. "What about it?"

"Our friend Barry got hit by lightning during it," Felicity tells her, trying very hard not to focus on the fact that she's outing a friend as a superhero before he's even aware of his powers. *One thing at a time.* "He's in a coma right now, but he's going to wake up able to run really, *really* fast. Fast enough to travel through time."

Absolutely none of her mother's skepticism dissipates at that as Donna just stares at her. Which, really, is pretty understandable when she thinks about the situation from a logical standpoint.

"Let's pretend, for a moment," Donna says, waving her hands, "that I believe any of this… Doctor How stuff you're throwing at me…"

"'Who,' Mom," Felicity says. "It's Doctor Who."

Really, you'd think she could get that part right considering how many episodes she watched with her.

"*Whatever*," Donna replies, waving a hand like she's swatting away the words. "Why in the world would he bring her here? Why now?"

"Because she's not safe in her own time," Oliver says. "Barry isn't the only one who can travel through time and there's someone after her. We don't know why he's after her, but our future selves thought she was safest by sending her back in time to stay with us now."

"Why would someone be after her?" Donna asks, her eyebrows rising as she looks at Moira before looking at them. "A *toddler*?"

And that… that is something they don't have an answer for, at least one they've discussed even though they've surely both thought about it. Oliver and Felicity look at each other, and when she sees the look in his eyes, she shakes her head.

"Oliver…"

"It's probably because I'm The Arrow," he says.

Felicity's sure her mother's eyes bug out at that - hers might've too because Oliver openly admitting the fact that he's the Starling City vigilante as if it's no big deal is actually a *really* big deal - but all her attention is on him for a different reason. It's like saying the words out loud suddenly solidifies how heavy they are and she can actually see the added weight on his shoulders.

"We don't know that that's why," Felicity says, twining their fingers together on his thigh as she touches his cheek with her other hand, urging him to look at her.

"You can't tell me that what we do isn't part of why Zoom's after her, Felicity," Oliver replies. For a blip of a moment, Felicity thinks he's going to turn in on himself, like he's always done, but he doesn't. It's a

testament to how much change he's undergone in the last few days when he turns to her. "If we didn't… I can't help but think that… Most three-year-olds don't have to worry about time-travelling supervillains trying to kill them, and if we weren't-"

"If we weren't what?" Felicity demands, cutting him off. "If we weren't ourselves? If we didn't fight to make this city safer, to make it a better place, he might not be after her? Don't go down that road, Oliver." He closes his eyes, moving to look away but she doesn't let him, because that's *not* why. "She's who she is because we're who *we* are. And I will never regret working to make this city a better place for her and every other person who lives here." Felicity stares at him, urging him to understand what she's saying. "You shouldn't either."

"I… I know," Oliver whispers. "I know that, I just…" He leans into her, his free hand gripping her knee as he squeezes her other hand tighter. "I just want her to be safe. And the thought that this might be because of *me*…"

"We don't know that," Felicity repeats. "And even if we did, it doesn't matter. Because I *know* - despite my own little mini-freakouts…" That earns her a breathy chuckle, both serving to lighten the mood and to remind him that she herself said the same thing how many times now? And how many times was it *him* reassuring *her*? "I know that we can keep her *and* the city safe."

There's an amazing thing that happens whenever they're so completely in-sync like they are right now. It's almost a communion, and she feels it on such a basic level. There's such a unity of purpose between them, not just with Ellie, but with their shared mission to save Starling City.

She knows he feels it too, just by the way he looks at her. He'd asked her to believe him earlier when he said things would be fine, and now she's asking him to trust her and believe her. And he does.

"You're…" Donna starts, reminding Felicity like a slap to the face that they aren't alone. "*You're* The Arrow?" Her eyes dart to Felicity, whose own widen when she realizes just what they've admitted in front of her. "And Felicity, you *help* him?"

A swarm of butterflies hit her gut and she nods, a little hesitantly. She's completely devoted to their mission, she doesn't regret a single second of it, but she's still a daughter, and some part of her finds itself wanting her mother's approval. Felicity holds her breath, waiting for whatever judgment her mother is about to dispense.

"Baby, that's…" Donna starts, looking toward Moira with a bodily nervousness, only to be greeted with a sad smile.

"Selfless," Moira supplies. "And more than a bit terrifying to her mother, no doubt."

"It's also dangerous," Donna adds firmly.

"There is no one in the world who can understand that better than I can," Moira replies. "And I say that as a woman who has unknowingly shot her own child."

Donna's eyes widen and she looks back to Oliver. He nods, actually looking sheepish, confirming his mother's story.

Oliver looks at Felicity. "But if you hadn't, Felicity might not have found out who I was." He smiles at Moira. "I think we can let that one go."

Felicity snorts, raising an eyebrow. "*Please*. You 'ran out of sports bottles?' I knew you were up to something way before that. Trust me, I would've figured it out."

Oliver laughs. "Yeah, you probably would have. But I'm glad you joined the team when you did. I needed you, even if I didn't know it back then."

She bites her lip to keep her pleased grin from taking over, but even that can't stop it. It still floors her that he says things like this to her, even more that he *means* them. Even with all the danger they face, everything that's happened still feels more like a dream than reality. It's only been a few days, but every time she wakes up she's a bit surprised that she's still *here*, that this is still her life. And, *oh*, she is so grateful for it.

"Well, as long as you know it now," Felicity replies, her cheeks flushing.

"I definitely know it," he says. He leans forward, kissing her temple with a quiet affection that makes her feel so incredibly solid and safe that it's astonishing.

When Felicity looks up, catching her mother's eye, she blushes even more, realizing both of their mothers are watching them. Moira has a pleased smile on her face, a motherly pride that only comes from seeing her child in a place she wholly approves of, while Donna looks

contemplative, like she's seeing a whole new side of Felicity that she's never had the pleasure of viewing before. Which, considering this is a new side for Felicity too, makes sense.

"Where is she?" Donna asks after a couple of beats.

"Where's who?" Felicity asks.

Exasperation colors her face as she clarifies, "Ellie."

"Oh. Right. She's, uh…" Felicity waves towards the backyard, where Diggle has disappeared. Her heart short-circuits before she thinks she sees his jeans near the entrance of the treehouse. The idea that Ellie probably talked him into going in as much as he could is painfully adorable. "She's with some bodyguards playing in her treehouse. Or castle, as she'd correct me." Felicity doesn't miss Oliver's amused smile. "Does that mean you believe us?"

That seems amazing, like *far* too much to ask for. But her mother has surprised her in the past and she's brave enough to hope for it this time, too.

Donna flips her hair over her shoulder before leaning forward. "Do you remember my friend the palm reader, baby?"

"Madame Serena?" Felicity questions, raising an eyebrow.

"She did a reading on you when you weren't even as old as Ellie."

Felicity blinks. "She did what now?"

Her mother ignores her. "And do you know what she said? She said you were destined for great things. But she also said that parts of your future were unwritten, that *you* had control. I've heard Serena do a lot of readings over the years, but I've never heard her tell someone that." She smiles, her eyes darting between her and Oliver. "Maybe this is why."

Felicity puts approximately as much stock in Madam Serena's palm readings as she does in Norton Anti-Virus' ability to protect her computer - which is to say that each of them are occasionally successful at their job entirely by accident - but it serves its purposes. Her mother believes them, and if it's because of a Vegas fortuneteller with a fake accent, then Felicity is going to choose to be very, very grateful to that woman.

"Now…" Donna says with a new flourish. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to meet my granddaughter."

Oliver's trust in Digg and Sara is unwavering. There are no two people in the world he could possibly put his faith in more when it comes to protecting someone, especially his own child. Despite that, he's still intensely relieved when he sends Digg a text message asking them to come back to the house and gets an immediate response. Seeing Diggle outside one second and the next he's gone had jolted him as much as it had Felicity.

"They'll be here in a few minutes," Oliver advises, looking up from his phone. He smiles. "She's telling her fairy subjects a story for their naptime."

"So no problems?" Felicity immediately asks. "I mean, obviously there's no problems or you wouldn't have led with fairy people naptime, but that doesn't mean I don't need to hear it."

He knows exactly how she feels. The tone of his text must have given away some of his anxiety about Ellie's safety, because Diggle had informed him there was nothing more dangerous than a potential splinter and he needed to take a deep breath and calm the hell down.

He looks forward to shoving those words back at Digg in a year or so.

Parenthood isn't anything like he might have imagined it would be. It's better and more terrifying than his mind had been able to envision. He looks at Ellie and he knows why his own father shot himself in the head instead of letting them both die of thirst. He looks at her and he gets why his mother went along with a plan to kill *thousands* rather than risk her own family. It's like watching the best part of himself walk around, vulnerable to all the dangers this world has to offer. Ellie is precious and perfect and so very innocent and he wants nothing more than to keep her happy and safe.

"*Oliver*," Felicity prods, anxiety shading her voice.

"Sorry. She's fine," Oliver replies. He squeezes her hand reassuringly. "She's having fun."

Felicity lets out an enormous sigh, followed by a breathy, "Good," and he actually feels a little guilty for taking so long to reply. He picks up their joined hands, kissing the inside of her wrist as a silent apology.

"So, she…" Donna starts, seeming almost self-conscious as her eyes

dart between them. "She likes fairies?"

"Yeah, she does," Felicity agrees, her voice softer than before. Her entire demeanor is soft as she looks at her mother. "Fairies and castles and strawberries and a cartoon raccoon named Rascal. She's… she's perfect. And she adores you."

Tears fill Donna's eyes as she nods in quick succession, pressing her fingers to her mouth.

A lot of Felicity and her mother's relationship remains a mystery to Oliver. Felicity's never really talked about her, and it's clear that they don't talk much at all. It's also very clear how much Felicity means to her mother, and how much Ellie - or the *idea* of Ellie, anyhow - means to her as well.

"So she knows me?" Donna asks, emotion clouding the words, her voice muffled through her fingers.

"Of course she knows you, Mom," Felicity replies. Her brow furrows in confusion, like the thought hadn't even occurred to her. She's too close to the situation to see it. "You're her grandmother. Why wouldn't she know you?"

Donna lets out a little sob at that, blinking hard.

"Honey, it's just… sometimes it seems like I'm not really a part of your life," she confesses. "I guess it's just good to know that it won't always be that way."

"Oh. Mom…" Felicity shifts uneasily, ducking her head. "It's not… I don't mean to shut you out. It's just… I'm not…"

"I get it, baby," Donna says. She smiles with a little shrug. "I don't understand your work. I never have. And your private life has always been… well, *private*." She levels Felicity with a knowing look. "You weren't ever going to tell me about helping The Arrow, were you?"

Felicity pauses, looking like she wants to lie before changing her mind. "No. I wasn't."

"You live this… this *big life*," Donna continues. "And I don't really get to be a part of it. But, baby, I've *always* been proud of you, even when I'm just on the outside looking in. You're my only child, Felicity. I guess it's just nice to know that someday we find something we can relate about, a way for me to fit into your life."

Felicity tenses at her mother's words. It's obvious she never quite understood how much the distance between them had affected her mother. From the little he's heard about it, Oliver thinks Felicity assumed the distance went both ways. Her brow furrows, her lips turning down in a small frown.

"You're my mother," Felicity says, as if that explains everything she's thinking all on its own. "You'll always be a part of my life. You raised me almost entirely on your own. I wouldn't be half the person I am now if it wasn't for you."

More tears fill Donna's eyes at that and she reaches across the open space between the loveseats, but whatever she's about to reply with is silenced by the sound of Ellie's delighted laugh. They all instantly look towards the noise, like the little girl is gravity.

The sight that greets Oliver on the back lawn is nearly enough to take his breath away.

Ellie's perched on Diggle's shoulders, giggling happily, her little golden curls bouncing with each of Digg's lurching steps. The sun catches the various hues in her long strands, emphasizing the little white wildflowers tucked behind her ear. Her happiness is clearly infectious as Diggle chuckles to himself while Sara - two feet to the side, wearing Ellie's crown - grins broadly as she looks up at the little girl with a kind of peace on her face that Oliver hasn't seen since before Lian Yu. Ellie has such a tremendous effect on all of them, the *best* kind of effect.

"Oh, Felicity," Donna breathes, scooting to the edge of the sofa. She reaches across and grips her daughter's hand. "Oh, baby, she's *beautiful*."

"Yeah," Felicity replies with obvious pride. Oliver sees her grip her mother's hand tighter, both their eyes on their daughter, and it makes Oliver smile as he watches some kind of newfound bond growing between the two women right before his eyes. "She's pretty perfect."

There's absolutely no question of when Ellie spots them through the open windows. Her jaw drops in excitement right before she starts waving frantically, a tremendous toothy grin overtaking her whole face.

"*Gramma!* Uncle Digg, I want down, it's my *Gramma*!"

She's a wiggly little thing in her eagerness and if Diggle had less

honed reflexes, she might have right fallen off his shoulders. But it's Digg and he's already well attuned to her movements, his hands moving to help ease her off her perch. She's all grins as he lowers her to the ground, and the instant her feet touch the grass, she's running for the door.

Ellie barrels into the room, heedless of absolutely anything else around her as she flings herself at Felicity's mother without pause. It's only the practiced move of a mother that has Donna catching her at the very right moment, pulling her up into her lap.

"Hi, Gramma!" the little girl exclaims.

The tears are back as Donna grins down at her, a shaky hand ghosting over Ellie's hair as she whispers, "Hi there."

If there had been any part of Donna Smoak that doubted their story, it most certainly would have been swayed by Ellie as she settles herself happily on her grandmother's lap and stares at her with bright, happy eyes. The little girl's honest, easy affection is a powerful thing and Donna is instantly overwhelmed by it, in the best way possible.

"I like your dress," Ellie says. "Do you like mine? My other Gramma got it for me. Is Pop-Pop here? Did you bring candy? Can I have some? Can we paint my nails?"

She's *buzzing* with excitement, the likes of which Oliver hasn't seen outside the influence of apple juice so far. It seems her grandmother induces much the same effect. Oliver finds himself making a mental note of that without even having to think about it.

"Yours are so pretty, can we do mine like yours? Did you bring the glittery kind? That's my favorite!"

"Oh my, let's hold on a minute, sweetheart," Donna says. She pulls back slightly so she can get a good look at the toddler cuddled up on her lap. "Oh, look at you, beautiful girl. It is… so very good to see you."

Ellie positively *beams* at her grandmother's attention. "You too! It's been *forever* since I saw you, Gramma. *Days* even. I missed you *this much*." She spreads her hands out as wide as they'll go, nodding in great seriousness as she does so.

Oliver almost feels uncomfortable watching as Donna's eyes water, her lower lip trembling before she draws Ellie into her arms, hugging her

tightly. It's a deeply personal moment, a moment shared only between a grandmother and grandchild, and it's even more profound because it's so apparent that Donna and Ellie spend a *lot* of time together in the future.

"Well, I'm here now, little one," Donna assures her, pressing her cheek to the top of Ellie's head, her eyes slipping shut as she savors the moment.

He catches Felicity reaching up to wipe her cheek from the corner of his eye and he glances over. Her eyes are just as watery when she meets his gaze, and they share a smile.

Giving Donna a moment with Ellie, Oliver looks at Sara and Diggle. "Everything went okay?"

"It went fine," Sara says, pointing toward the tiara on her head. She dips into an amused curtsy. "I was crowned Vice President."

"I… don't think that's how that works," Felicity replies.

"Well, it does in fairy kingdom," Sara advises, pulling the tiara off of her head. She sets it down on the arm of the sofa, Ellie and Donna's whispers rising in the background as she looks at him. "Ollie, you got a minute? I wanted to run something past you."

"Now?" he asks.

It's not even that the police could arrive at any moment, or that Zoom is an ever-present threat, or that they have no idea what Isabel and Blood are planning, all on top of just having Felicity's mother thrown in the mix. It's also that he doesn't want to leave this moment.

"Yeah, Ollie," Sara says with a nod. "Now."

"Okay," Oliver replies, but he still doesn't move. "Digg, can you-"

"You don't even have to ask, man," Diggle interrupts, leaning back against the wall. "I got your back *and* theirs. You know that."

He gives the other man a grateful smile, one which Diggle replies to with a little shake of his head, both of them knowing he just needs to *hear* the words. Oliver turns to Felicity, squeezing her hand as he leans in to kiss her briefly. "Be back in a few minutes."

"Okay," she agrees easily as he stands, reluctantly releasing her hand.

Even with the sight of Ellie cuddling up with Donna on the sofa opposite her, Oliver can feel Felicity's eyes follow him until he's out of the room. From the moment he's out the door, every part of him itches to go back.

Sara doesn't give him a second to linger though, already moving towards his mother's office.

As she shuts the door, Oliver asks, "What's up?"

She doesn't answer right away, something that makes his stomach sink, and when she finally turns to face him, the grave look on her face tells him whatever she's about to broach is something he isn't going to like.

A nervous edge slices through him and Oliver widens his stance, bracing himself, as he asks, "What is it?"

"Something occurred to me while we were outside," Sara says, her voice a complete one-eighty from the lightness she'd worn so effortlessly just a moment ago around Ellie.

Oliver frowns. "What?"

"Ellie's not born yet," Sara says slowly, giving him a heavy look that makes absolutely no sense in Oliver's head because *obviously* Ellie isn't born yet. That's not news and he doesn't understand why it necessitates a private conversation.

"Yeah…" he confirms, waiting for her to say more.

"Ollie…" Sara's shoulders fall in exasperation. "If Zoom is trying to get to Ellie, to destroy *her*, then going after her parents before she's ever born is every bit as effective."

Everything inside him freezes. That hadn't even occurred to him. Not once. Ice water floods his veins at the implication of what she's saying, what she's inferring. He can only stare at her, not breathing, his hands curling into fists so tight his nails bite into his palms.

"You can protect yourself," Sara continues, as if she isn't saying something that's terrifying him on an entirely primal level. "At least better than they can. But Felicity… Ellie isn't the only one in danger. I just wanted to make sure you were aware of that. Felicity can't be out of our sight either, not until this is over. Maybe not even then."

It makes sense - of course they're in danger; of course *Felicity's* in danger.

Oliver can't do anything as he tries to wrap his mind around that, around the fact that he hadn't thought about it, that Zoom could have appeared at any time, anywhere, with either of them. That it could have happened at any point already, that it could happen sometime in the future - or the past - is *paralyzing*.

No. No, he just got everything - *everything* - he's ever wanted, all the things he was too afraid to want, to need, to rely on, and just as quickly, there's someone trying to take them away. *No*. No, he can't lose either of them. He *refuses* to.

And he won't.

"Thank you," Oliver chokes out - it's all he can manage just then - as he reaches for the doorknob, the need to see his family burning even stronger than it already was.

Sara touches his arm. "We'll get through this, Ollie. It'll be okay."

"You *just* pointed out to me that my future wife and child have targets on their backs," he snaps, whirling back to face her. The only surprise she shows at his sudden move is her eyebrows shooting up, and she doesn't move an inch as he advances on her. "How *exactly* is that okay?"

"Because they've got *us*," Sara replies with just as much vehemence, not backing down for an instant. "Because they've got *you*. That's what makes it okay. So don't take my head off just because I pointed out that you need to keep your eyes open. I did that for you and for *her* because, believe it or not, you aren't the only one who cares about Felicity, Oliver."

He grits his teeth at that, setting his jaw, not liking her tone, because he *knows* she's right. He knows his anger toward her is completely unearned, but Zoom isn't here and there's no good target for him to aim his anxiety at.

Just the *thought*… Fear and anger burn through him like acid. There really is something to the idea of ignorance is bliss, because now this is all he's going to be thinking about. Every time he looks at Felicity, he'll wonder if it's the last time. And *god*, when he looks at Ellie…

"Hey," Sara says, pulling him back. "I know you're scared, and I get it.

You and me? People like us don't get a 'happily ever after.' It's a fantasy that's always out of reach. But, Ollie… you've *got it*, and you can see it right in front of you and you're terrified that someone might take it away. I get that, and it's why I'm going to do everything I can to make sure it doesn't go anywhere. Okay?"

He can only stare at her, and she sees the answer even though he can't say it.

"But just because I'm doing that doesn't mean you get to take all this out on me." Sara raises an eyebrow, almost like she's waiting for him to challenge her on that. "Got it?"

If this had been any other situation, he might have laughed a little, because he can't believe that she is his friend, that he gets to have her by his side, helping him. But it's *this* situation and Oliver doesn't trust his voice just yet.

He nods sharply instead.

Sara smirks, raising an eyebrow. "I'm gonna pretend that was an apology for biting my head off just now because that's the closest I'm gonna get, isn't it?"

Oliver has the grace to flinch. He manages a barely audible, "Sorry," even though it feels like sandpaper in his throat.

"Now was that so hard?" she asks, looking more amused than is warranted at the moment.

"Don't push it," he grits out, sounding very much like he's using his voice modulator.

Sara rolls her eyes at him, shaking her head before nodding to the door, a clear indication for them to get back to the others. He's definitely in line with that thinking. The urge to get back to his family itches under his skin. He wants nothing more than to wrap them both up in his arms and lock the world outside away forever.

Unfortunately that has to wait for a bit though, because the second he opens the office door, he hears the front door open.

Quentin Lance's distinctive voice echoes down the hall.

"*Dunno how you got messed up in all this, Laurel,*" he grumbles. "*Damned Queen family drama. You got more sense than to stick your neck out for*

him."

"*This isn't about Oliver,*" Laurel argues back. "*This is about a three-year-old little girl who needs my help. I'm not going to turn my back on a kid in need, dad."*

"*An' the best thing for her is Queen? What's the alternative?*" Lance snarks, making Oliver wince. He's well aware of the other man's opinion of him, but he doesn't need to hear that voiced in reference to Ellie.

"*I think he'll surprise you with her,*" Laurel says, her voice hardening as she comes to their defense. "*And so will Felicity*."

"*The assistant*?" Lance scoffs. "*I know her. She's a good kid, but I'm not sure she's exactly in the position to play mommy at the moment. She's got… other loyalties."*

The Arrow, he means The Arrow.

Damn it, Oliver forgot that Lance was aware of that association.

The man in question rounds the corner in front of them, Laurel at his side. Oliver doesn't miss the sour look that twists Lance's face when he spots him, especially when he sees Sara.

"Officer Lance," Oliver says in greeting. "I'd heard you'd be coming by with some questions."

"Queen," the policeman greets gruffly before narrowing his eyes at Sara. "Why's it both my daughters always seem to be wherever you are?"

Oliver presses his lips into a thin line as Sara groans, "Dad."

"No, really," Lance reasserts, folding his arms. "I wanna know what it is that gets both my girls messed up in whatever his drama is."

"Must be how well they were raised," Oliver replies before he can think twice. He can't help himself. He *just can't help himself*. Normally he's able to bite his tongue, to keep quiet because some part of him will always accept the blame the older man places at his feet, no matter what, but not today, not now. Something about the way Lance is talking about him sets him on edge, throwing him back in time, and suddenly he's eighteen and stupid all over again.

"What'd you say?" Lance asks, stepping up and Oliver finds himself

moving forward too, a white noise filling his ears. But before anything can happen, Laurel tugs her father back just as Sara's hand appears on Oliver's chest, pushing him backwards.

"Don't be a dumbass, Ollie," Sara says. "That's not who you are."

Whatever Laurel's saying to her dad, he doesn't hear as Sara's words sink in.

Oliver closes his eyes, stepping back. The sudden urge to punch the hell out of something has nothing to do with Lance, he knows that logically, but everything to do with Zoom and the growing threat he represents against his family. Just because Lance has the ability to tap into the worst of him doesn't mean he needs to rise to the occasion - he has people in his life who are owed a whole lot more than that.

But *damn it*, he wants to hit something and the accusation in Lance's eyes isn't helping anything.

"*I'm good*," Lance snaps at Laurel, shrugging off her hand. He adjusts his shirt, cracking his neck a bit before looking back to Oliver. "I'm here in an official capacity."

"Ollie…" Sara says, his name heavy with warning that states she definitely doesn't trust his pending response.

"You are very welcome in that capacity," Oliver grits out with a forced smile. His voice is almost mechanical as he continues. "Someone bugged my mother's house. We haven't touched the cameras, in case there are fingerprints on them. Felicity found them because our internet connection was slow. They're transmitting using our wifi."

"I'm gonna need to talk to her," Lance says, shifting into a more professional mode. "Where's she at?"

An excited noise from down the hall stops Oliver from responding, and it simultaneously sends a bolt of shocked dread and gratitude through him because he *needs* to see Felicity before anything else happens.

But then Oliver realizes what that excited noise is, and it completely throws him. There's a lot he's prepared for - Isabel, Zoom, a tear in the timestream, a blur of red in the form of Barry - but this… Yeah, he's not prepared.

"*Pop-Pop!*"

Ellie's a blur as she rushes down the hall, throwing herself at Lance's leg, much to his confusion, Oliver's horror, Laurel's disbelief and Sara's blatant amusement.

"Oh. My. *God*," Felicity says from the end of the hall, both of their mothers closing in behind her. Felicity's eyes are wide, her jaw slack as Ellie's words about 'Pop-Pop' that morning suddenly make so much more sense. The kind of sense that doesn't make *any* sense. "*Oh my God*. What… I just… That can't possibly…" She shakes her head, speechless. She whirls to face her mother, who looks completely unaware of what's going on, before looking back at Ellie, and then Oliver, and then back to Ellie. "Can somebody pinch me, please?"

Sara snorts, a grin pulling at her lips. "Go on, Ollie," she says, elbowing him. "She asked nicely and everything."

Exasperation shoves its way through him and Oliver shoots his ex-girlfriend a withering look because now is *really not the time*. It only seems to amuse her even more as she laughs outright.

"Did you bring candy?" Ellie asks, tugging on Lance's pant leg, staring up at him with wide, adoring eyes. "I didn't know you were here. Wanna see my crown? It's very pretty. It's an *heirloom*." She drags the word out, spending too much time on the 'm' sound. "Daddy says so, cause it was Aunt Thea's when *she* was my age. Isn't that cool, Pop-Pop?"

"What the hell's a Pop-Pop?" Lance asks in confusion as Donna suddenly makes a little squeal down the hall. Oliver looks over in time to see her grip her daughter's shoulder too tightly, eliciting an, "Ow, Mom! Claws. God, your nails!"

"I do love a man in uniform," Donna whispers, or in what she *thinks* is a whisper. Oliver hopes Lance is deafer than he looks, but he isn't sure.

"Oh my god, Mom," Felicity groans

"Well, he's very handsome, Felicity." She blinks coquettishly in their direction. "Don't you think he's handsome?"

"I can honestly say that is a thought I've never had," Felicity deadpans, looking like she'd rather be anywhere else.

"Really," Lance says in blatant confusion. "What's a Pop-Pop?"

Both Donna and Felicity look up with matching deer-caught-in-headlights looks on their faces. If there was one less person there, Oliver would find that ridiculously cute, but now's not the time. Now's not the time for *many* things.

"You, uh… you look like her grandfather," Oliver says, and it sounds weak and pathetic, but he doesn't care. He just needs Ellie out of there. He goes to them and leans down to his daughter's level, gripping her arm to peel her off Lance. "*Lily*, honey, can you go with Sara? There's strawberry ice cream in the freezer. She's going to get you a bowl, okay?"

"Really?" Ellie asks, the use of the wrong name going right over her head as her eyes go wide. "I can have ice cream, Daddy?"

"Absolutely," he confirms, tapping her on the tip of her nose, making her giggle. "Just not so much you have a tummyache, okay? And stay with Sara."

"And me," Diggle announces, stepping forward. "I don't want to miss the ice cream."

His words are light but the look on his face isn't as he offers Oliver a heavy look, his gaze slipping briefly to Felicity and back as he raises his eyebrows in an unspoken statement.

Something sinks in Oliver's gut at that look. Digg and Sara are on the same page about the potential danger to Felicity. He's sure of it. It's something they talked about, probably in hushed, half-coded words tucked away in Ellie's fairy castle. This look, though… this is Digg telling him '*I've got Ellie. You keep both eyes on Felicity*' and he *knows* it. Sara's words from earlier ring in his ears - "*You aren't the only one who cares about Felicity, Oliver.*" The truth of that is undeniable and it simultaneously makes the danger to her all the more real and eases his worries some.

There is nothing Digg will not do for Felicity. *Nothing.*

"Okay!" Ellie says, dragging Oliver back to the present before she grabs Sara's hand and makes insistent, grabby fingers in Digg's direction. "Come on, Uncle Digg and Big Sara! *Ice cream*!"

"You got it, kid," Sara replies, saluting her dad as they pass.

"Kidd-*o*," Ellie corrects, their voices fading as they make their way toward the kitchen. "Like the captain, remember? *Kiddooooooo*…"

Lance watches them until they're gone, his face twisted with incredulity. "Really?" He looks at Oliver, and that edge from a second ago is back. "You're playing *daddy* now?"

That hits Oliver in his gut in a way he's not prepared for, a decisive blow that takes his breath away. He loves Ellie with everything he's made of, but that doesn't change the fact that he's new at this, that she's in constant danger, that he blames himself for it… that he's not entirely sure he's good enough for her.

"You have no idea what you're talking about." The click of Felicity's heels against the hardwood floor cuts through the tension growing between them as she strides forward until she's at Oliver's side, grasping his hand tightly in hers as she glowers at Lance. "That little girl has been through more than you know and she feels safe and loved because Oliver has welcomed her with open arms. She's lucky to have him. *I'm* lucky to have him."

It's the certainty in her voice more than her words that reassures him. She believes what she's saying with every fiber of her being - he can *hear* that, he can *feel* that, and it makes all the difference.

"An' what's she been through, exactly?" Lance asks, eyeing Felicity with complete disbelief. "'Cause while SCPD might show record that you've got a cousin in rehab, this ain't the first time I've looked into you Ms. Smoak, an' no matter what your *hobbies* are, you can't hack my memory. You don't have any cousins. No aunts or uncles, either. Just yourself an' your mom. So you wanna tell me where that kid came from?"

His words echo against the walls with a finality that leaves *zero* room for argument and Felicity pales. Even if she'd been prepared to lie to Lance, Oliver knows from experience that there is no way in the world he's going to buy it. Not now.

"You're… remembering wrong," Felicity says, but it's the opposite of convincing as her hand suddenly grips Oliver's so tightly her knuckles are turning white against his.

"I've been a cop a long time, Ms. Smoak," Lance reminds her. "And I've been a father almost as long. I'm pretty damned good at knowing when I'm bein' lied to by now."

This statement is painfully ironic, all things considered, but there's really no time to dwell on that at the moment because the implications of what Lance is saying are huge and terrifying. And he

isn't done talking. Lance steps forward, lowering his voice, his eyes darting quickly toward Oliver before looking back at Felicity.

"I think I've got a pretty good idea where she came from," he says, raising his eyebrows meaningfully. "But maybe you an' I should maybe have a word alone about that."

Oliver frowns - *what?* - turning to Felicity. He can see Felicity's mind working as she tries to sort out what Lance means, and it's clear when she's connected some dots because the look on her face suddenly becomes guarded, but less worried.

He's not sure exactly what to make of that.

"I don't have any secrets from Oliver," Felicity finally replies.

It's a statement that visibly stuns the policeman, who takes a step back and looks at him with wary eyes. Oliver isn't quite sure how to respond to that, but it slowly dawns on him that they're talking - on some level - about The Arrow.

Oh.

"Laurel," Lance says without turning to look at his eldest daughter. "Can you go check on your sister and the kid for me, please?"

"Sure," Laurel replies, but before she moves, her eyes switch to Oliver, the question in them evident. The move makes the muscles in her father's jaw twitch, his displeasure at her seeking his approval incredibly clear. If she notices it, she doesn't mention it. Laurel rests her hand on Lance's shoulder. "Be nice, Dad. You're here because they've been victimized. Remember that."

"Yeah, yeah," Lance says, looking uneasy at being put in his place by his daughter as she turns to leave.

Down the hall, Moira recognizes the police officer's dismissal, even though it was nowhere near directed at her. But then, picking up on social cues has always come as easily to Moira Queen as breathing.

"Donna," Moira says, placing a guiding hand on the other woman's elbow. "Let's get you settled in your room. I believe you said you brought some photos along?"

"Oh, *God*," Felicity moans, turning her face into Oliver's shoulder as their mothers disappear up the stairs, Donna's answer too far away to

hear.

"It's fine," Oliver reminds her, his hand settling between her tense shoulders, his thumb rubbing circles against the knots of her spine. "I'm sure you were an adorable baby and my mother is going to think so, too. I'm pretty sure you can do no wrong in her eyes at this point."

It's shocking because it's *true*. His mother has gone from completely cold toward her to utterly committed to the idea of this woman one day being her beloved daughter-in-law and mother to her grandchildren.

Now that he thinks about it, that shift in his mother's perspective explains her sudden chilly attitude toward Laurel. He knows he isn't the only one who'd once assumed a future between them was inevitable, and he wonders absently if she doesn't view Laurel as something of a threat. To Felicity. To Ellie's very existence. To her family. It's likely, he realizes with some surprise. There's zero doubt about where his mother's loyalty lies at this point. He should probably clarify with her at some point that she's completely *wrong*. He's been absurdly clear about what he wants - *who* he wants - and the future he sees laid out in front of him doesn't feature Laurel at all.

But they have more immediate concerns at the moment.

"No secrets from *him*?" Lance asks, jutting his thumb in Oliver's direction in a dismissive way that makes Oliver bristle. "*Really*?"

"I was the Executive Assistant for a CEO of a Fortune 500 company," Felicity points out. "Do you really think I could have helped The Arrow *without* him knowing?"

Lance snorts, like he isn't willing to buy it just yet as he looks at Oliver with narrowed eyes, like he's trying to make pieces of a puzzle fit together that really don't. "An' you're okay with that?"

"The Arrow tried to stop a terror attack that killed my best friend," Oliver says bluntly, his tone leaving no room for argument. "He tried to stop my mother from becoming a murderer. If he needs help doing things like that, I'm not about to stand in the way."

"Huh." Lance's lengthy scrutiny puts Oliver's teeth on edge, but he doesn't flinch. He can't. There's entirely too much at stake for that. "So you lend out your computer-expert-slash-girlfriend and… what? Toss a million or two at him on the side to fund his little crusade?" Lance asks. "Been wonderin' where he's gettin' the cash to do what he does."

Oliver smiles tightly. "If I do, I'm pretty sure you won't be able to prove it."

That earns him a sharp elbow in the ribs from Felicity. It might not be the brightest thing to say, but he's also *right*, and they both know it. Felicity's computer skills are as thorough as they are impressive. Between her skillset and his more-than-passing-familiarity with money laundering thanks to his Bratva days, the money trail between Queen family funds and their nighttime activities is probably the best hidden aspect of what they do.

"Nice," Lance says with a derisive twist of his lips. "Fine. Whatever. So you're both on Team Arrow."

Felicity coughs violently at the casual declaration, making Lance's eyebrows shoot right up. Oliver has to resist the urge to grin as he rubs her back soothingly, waiting for her to settle and for some of the excess color to drain from her face.

"We don't actually call ourselves that," Oliver informs Lance. He ignores the incredulous look from Felicity because replaying those words again is considerably more fun than it really ought to be, especially considering the circumstances.

"I don't wanna know," Lance informs him. "Let's get back to me being about the cameras and about Lily, 'cause I think we all know where she came from and it ain't upstate New York."

"Where, uh…" Felicity pats her chest, her voice strained with wariness. "Where exactly do you think she came from?"

"Please," Lance huffs. "I ain't stupid. We've got no open cases involving a kid by her description. She's not in the national database of missing kids an' she's clearly got more than a passing familiarity with you. Her reaction to the lights at the press conference is proof enough she's been through some kinda trauma and you've got my daughter playing *bodyguard*." He levels her with a no-bullshit look. "That tells me she's in *some* kinda danger."

Felicity shifts uneasily at the picture he paints of the situation as Oliver's hand stills against her back. His fingers curl into the fabric at the top of her dress like he's gripping onto it for support. He's not entirely sure where Lance is going with this, but he's not comfortable with it in the least.

"She's his, isn't she?" Lance asks after a beat. "The Arrow's?"

That is the very last thing they expected him to say, and that neither of them immediately respond is probably proof enough for Lance. They're both at a loss for words. They hadn't anticipated this, not even a little.

"So I'm right," Lance deduces, shaking his head a little. "She's The Arrow's kid."

"Yes…" Felicity confirms slowly, watching the older man with guarded eyes. "She is."

"Wow," Lance says with a short laugh. "I gotta say, I've got a real hard time picturing him changin' diapers." He shakes his head, his tone almost mocking as he continues, "My sympathies to the first boy who dares to ask her out on a date."

Something about that irks Oliver wildly, but not in the way he might have expected. Yes, he wants to keep her safe - from Zoom, from Slade, from Isabel - but not from the world at large. He wants her to experience life as she grows up, to have all of those important moments that make life worth living - to make friends and to fall in love, to take risks and find *meaning*. He wants to see her grow into a self-assured, confident young woman who chases her dreams, whatever they might ultimately be.

"Pretty sure that boy will only have to worry if he fails her," Oliver says, his voice hard. He doesn't miss the incredibly proud look that Felicity shoots him out of the corner of his eye. "If he uses that boy for target practice, it'll be because she told him to, not because he takes an interest in her."

"You know him *that* well, huh?" Lance asks sarcastically.

"We're… well-acquainted," Oliver replies.

"Yeah," Lance says, eyeing him. "Okay." Oliver has to bite his tongue to keep from retorting at the blatant disbelief in his tone as the policeman looks back to Felicity. "An' the kid's mom? Where's she at?"

"I'm the only mom she's ever known," Felicity replies, an edge of nerves sharpening her voice. Anyone listening would know that just by that sound that there's no power in the world that will be able to take Ellie away from them. "She belongs here. With me. With *us*. We can keep her safe… and loved and secure. There's literally no one else in the world who can do that. That's why she's here." She squeezes Oliver's hand. "Her father loves her *so* much but she's not safe back

home right now, so this is her home. And it needs to stay that way. It *needs* to."

"Alright, alright, calm down," Lance advises, picking up on the increasing note of panic in her voice. "I ain't about to take her from you. It's not like I could prove any of this anyhow. Not without a DNA test."

Oh, that's a mind-boggling thought. Oliver's well aware of what a DNA test would reveal and *wow*, would that open up a can of worms they can't possibly deal with.

"Even if I were inclined to try an' get a court order to have one run - which I'm not, by the way," Lance adds when Felicity stiffens. "We both know what would happen to any DNA test given your… *hobbies*."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Felicity denies in a rush of breath.

"*Sure* you don't," Lance scoffs. "So The Arrow's got a three-year-old… *Damn*." He sighs and shakes his head, looking surprisingly bothered by this information. "And you aren't her actual mother? 'Cause, I gotta say… given your work with him, I kinda thought…"

"What?" Felicity asks. "That I was helping him because we have some kind of history? Because I'm secretly pining for him or something?" Felicity smiles tightly. "Sorry to disappoint you, Detective, but I help him because I believe in him and his mission. I've also never been pregnant, which is a pretty important step in having a child. And," she adds, glancing at Oliver, "as Oliver made it incredibly clear at the press conference, he and I are together. And I'm sort of head-over-heels crazy in love with him."

Lance winces at the declaration, but even his judgement can't tamp down the thrill that runs through Oliver's body at Felicity's words. He doesn't think he'll ever get tired of hearing her say she loves him, or the way a pleased flush colors her skin when she says it. It's still new, of course, but it strikes a chord in him that makes his heart beat faster and a grin tug at his lips without even thinking about it.

When Oliver looks back at Lance, the older man is staring at him with an indecipherable look.

"Okay then," Lance finally says, because there's really nothing else he can say. Not now. Not in the face of their united front. "How 'bout we talk about the cameras."

Taking her cue, Felicity launches into a highly technical explanation that Oliver's sure Lance follows about as well as he does. Which is to say not at all. But the gist of it is that they're being spied on, they can prove it, and there's material evidence for the police.

She pulls out her tablet as she talks, tapping into the cameras that are still transmitting in spite of Oliver's very public revelation of their existence.

Lance turns grim at the sight of the video feed.

They see a peek of Ellie through a hallway camera as she rushes around the kitchen, most definitely on a sugar high. They see Moira and Donna in an upstairs hall, Moira pointing out a baby picture of Oliver's sitting on an accent table. And they see themselves, all huddled around Felicity at the far end of the hallway. Lance looks up, right at where the camera must be.

Until he'd seen the actual proof of cameras watching them, Oliver's pretty sure that Lance hadn't quite believed their story. But now… now he does and he's entirely in law enforcement mode.

"I'm gonna need to have a word with your mother about who's had access to the house," Lance says, his voice gruff, taking in the scene before him before glancing at them. "You really think Blood had a hand in this?"

"I really, really do," Felicity confirms. "Probably not directly, because he's too smart for that, but it makes sense. If you fingerprint the cameras, you probably won't find *his* fingerprints, but looking at who benefits from spying on Moira or leaking Lily's existence? It's pretty obvious that it's Blood." A pinched look covers her face. "Or Isabel Rochev, given how buddy-buddy they were at his last press conference. My money's on both."

"On account of the takeover at Queen Consolidated," Lance adds with an absent nod, following the train of thought with ease. "Yeah. Okay. Politics and business. I can see it. But a theory's a long ways off from proof. This have anything to do with whatever danger the kid's in?"

"Not directly," Oliver answers. "But it certainly adds to it. The Arrow's got no shortage of enemies. Some are just… more of a problem than others."

"An' the enemy of my enemy's my friend," Lance says, giving them a heavy look. "Whoever's after the kid catches wind of Blood and

Rochev having goals that line up and you might end up with a way bigger problem."

Oliver pauses at that. He looks to Felicity for guidance - an opinion, *anything* - but she doesn't look terribly concerned by this idea. Truth be told, neither is he. From the little they've seen of Zoom it doesn't seem like he's the sort to track down possible allies and work in concert with them. They could be wrong on that, of course, but something tells Oliver that Zoom and the duo of Blood and Isabel are two completely separate adversaries.

"At any rate," Lance continues. "The potential there is bad enough your 'friend' might be able to help us out." He completely ignores Oliver, looking to Felicity. "If he can point us in the direction of solid evidence against them, it'd be a big help."

"Yeah, okay," Felicity says, her eyes slipping over to Oliver before she catches herself. She nods, biting her lip. "I'll talk to him."

"Good," Lance says. "I'm gonna go have a word with Moira then." He reaches to take the tablet from her but he pauses at the last second. It takes Oliver a second to realize why. Felicity had flinched, pulling it closer to her chest. Lance stares at her. "I'm gonna need to take that thing as evidence. You know that, right?"

Felicity groans, staring down at the tech longingly. She must have known this was coming, he'd seen her deleting files in the car earlier, but the reality of parting her from her beloved technology is clearly something she's not ready to accept.

"I expect her back *exactly* as you got her," Felicity says as she slowly hands it over, like she's relinquishing Ellie rather than an iPad. "Don't you dare download any updates or delete anything. And if anyone spills anything on her, you don't want to know what I'll do."

Lance just blinks, staring at her like she's grown three more heads.

Oliver chuckles. "Felicity…" The look she sends him is anything but amused, and it's his turn to pause, giving her a placating smile. When she deflates slightly, he pulls her hand back from where it's stroke the smooth back of the tablet. "Come on. Let's go check on… on Lily. Alright? Detective Lance will take care of your tablet."

"He better," she grumbles, her eyes still on the tablet.

Oliver has to bite the inside of his lip to keep his grin at bay - it's

ridiculously cute how protective she is of her tech. He wisely keeps that bit to himself though, not wanting to wade into the dangerous waters with Lance.

"He will," Oliver reiterates, and Felicity finally looks at him.

"I'm just gonna go find Moira," Lance says warily, stepping away the second Felicity's attention is diverted. "Keep your phones on you. We'll have more questions."

He's a smart man, Quentin Lance. He takes the opportunity to slip away the moment it's given without so much as a backwards glance. Oliver can respect that, especially given the fact that the man is actually *walking away with Felicity's tech*. But still, the reality that this man will somehow wind up his father-in-law one day is… *unsettling*.

Oliver shakes that thought off. "Come on." He pulls Felicity close and kisses her temple. "Let's go see how Ellie's doing." Her shoulders visibly relax at the mention of their daughter - if there's one thing that's going to distract her from letting go of her tablet, it's Ellie. Oliver pauses long enough to press a kiss to her shoulder as well before he takes her hand. "We can have some ice cream with her if you want."

He smiles when her eyebrows raise in contemplation at the idea.

"Make it wine and you've got a deal," she tells him. "For me, not Ellie. She's too little. Obviously. And later. Again, obviously. I don't think we're at the point where we wine out with our child right there. Yet. Or ever? It's only been a few days, I don't think we have a good foundation for that assumption just yet."

Oliver chuckles in agreement. "Later." He wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her into his side. Even if they wanted to, the wine cellar is in the opposite direction, and while he has no objection to taking her down there and letting her choose whatever she wants, he isn't ready to be away from Ellie just yet.

Still… the idea of Felicity plus wine plus hopefully a bed? It's tempting. *Really* tempting.

His grip on her tightens and he presses his lips to her temple again. "Definitely later."

Felicity bites her lip, ducking her head, turning her face into his chest at the promise in his voice. Oliver kisses the top of her head,

prompting her to press a kiss right over his heart.

They hear Ellie well before they see her. She's talking a mile-a-minute, punctuated only by her own laughter as the sugar high she's clearly on fuels her babble.

"I'm the *Waverider!*" Ellie squeals, giggling madly. "Watch me go *invisible! Faster,* Big Sara!"

The instant they reach the kitchen, they both stop, taking in the scene. Diggle's sitting on a barstool, bowl and spoon in-hand, positioned where he has the entire kitchen in his line of sight, including Sara and Ellie. They're swooping around the room, Sara holding Ellie overhead, her little arms stretched out, highlighting the gleeful smile on her face.

"What exactly is a Waverider and why is it invisible?" Felicity asks quietly as they watch.

Oliver shakes his head. "A jet ski or something? Maybe a boat?"

Felicity looks up at him, raising her eyebrows skeptically. "You think we have a *boat* that turns invisible in the future?"

"Well," Oliver says, "I think me owning a boat at all is a longshot. Ellie's imagination is pretty amazing. Maybe it's a boat in her fairy kingdom." He shrugs. "Who knows."

"Daddy! Momma!" Ellie shrieks with delight. "Look, I'm flying!"

"And flying *after* ice cream at that," Felicity says, moving to stand next to Diggle. Sara lets Ellie drop in her arms, a move that has her shrieking even *louder* with laughter. How has this kid not thrown up yet? "That seems like a pretty questionable idea."

"You try telling her no," Sara huffs, collapsing next to Diggle with Ellie in her lap. "See how that works out for you."

"Can we do more, Big Sara?" Ellie asks, batting her eyelashes like it's an innocent thing, when it clearly *isn't*. She knows exactly what she's doing. "*Please*."

"Munchkin, I've done endurance training with the *League of Assassins* and you wear *me* out," Sara declares. "I need a *break*."

"Uncle Diggle?" Ellie asks, turning her wide-eyed gaze toward him and

blinking up with the most guileless look Oliver's ever seen. He has to cover his mouth to hide the smile as she lays it on Digg. "Can we play Waverider?"

"Sorry, kiddo," Digg says, shaking his head. Ellie's face falls in one of the most exaggerated pouts Oliver's ever seen. "I'm not willing to risk it after you downed that much ice cream."

"Exactly how much ice cream did you have, Ellie-bug?" Felicity asks, making her way over to them. She runs her fingers through her long hair as Ellie replies, "Not *that* much, Momma."

"Are you done with my dad already?" Sara asks.

"He's talking to my mother," Oliver replies, but he only has eyes for his girls. Ellie beams up at her mother's attention, positively glowing as Felicity whispers something that makes her giggle. "I think he's done with us today anyway." He smiles wryly. "He thinks Ellie is The Arrow's daughter."

Digg snorts around a spoonful of ice cream.

"Well... " Sara says with a shrug. "He's not exactly wrong."

"We should probably let you guys head out, huh?" Felicity asks. She smiles at them. "Thank you guys for watching Ellie." With that, Felicity dips her head down to get closer to Ellie's level. "What do you think, sweetie?"

"Nuh uh," Ellie replies, shaking her head.

Felicity's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh?"

"Actually," Sara says, shifting Ellie so the toddler's further down on her leg. She starts bouncing her knee slightly, making Ellie giggle, and really, it's amazing that nothing's come up yet. Sara smiles at Felicity and then Oliver. "We have very important fairy business to discuss."

"Yep," Ellie agrees, nodding, even though she clearly has no idea what she's agreeing to.

"Is that so?" Felicity asks.

Sara nods, and as Oliver watches, Ellie mirrors her. Not for the first time since she's entered their lives, Oliver wonders just how much trouble he's in for with her. His daughter's not even four and she's

already a force of nature.

"It is," Sara says, raising her eyebrows meaningfully. "Which means you guys should... take a few."

Oliver instantly knows what she's saying and he presses his lips into a thin line, raising his eyebrows at her in question - only Sara Lance would go through what she's gone through the last several days and be suggesting that.

Sara just smirks at him.

"Take a few..." Felicity repeats slowly, her brow furrowing. When the meaning behind Sara's words hit her, she jerks, her mouth forming a little 'o'. "Oh. Like... *take a few*."

Sara laughs, echoing Diggle's amused chuckles.

"Yes. Take a few." Sara wraps her arms around Ellie's waist. "Go. We've got the little one."

"Are you sure? I mean… no, no, you don't have to do that," Felicity says, turning to look back at Oliver. "I mean, that's not necessary. At all."

"We're not saying it's necessary, Felicity," Diggle replies with a smile. "We're here, and we're not going anywhere, not while all this is going on. So why not take advantage of it?"

"But…"

"Look, you two've been running yourselves ragged. Take a break. Take some time for yourselves. Take a nap." His eyes sparkle at that bit, and Oliver narrows his eyes at him. He just winks. "We've got Ellie."

"Is that… I mean… thank you. It's just that…" A hesitant look crosses Felicity's face as she looks at Diggle and then at Ellie. Oliver is suddenly reminded of earlier, when they watched Ellie leave them like it was no big deal. "I just…"

Oliver knows exactly what she's about to say and why she's about to say it. It's not just that they're imposing on Sara and Diggle's time, it's that the thought of being away from Ellie for longer than they already have been is damn near unbearable, so much so that he almost agrees with Felicity. But… they're also right. He wants to be with Ellie. He really, really does. But a little time to themselves sounds *amazing*. And

yet… He's at war with himself over the idea and he knows Felicity is, too.

"How about we go get that wine you were talking about?" Oliver suggests. Felicity whirls around to face him, looking ready to argue - she thinks it's going *out* to get it, not a simple walk down the hallway. He smiles. "It's not that far."

"Well… okay," Felicity finally says.

"Good," he says with a nod. Oliver makes his way over to his family, taking Felicity's hand and leaning over to kiss the top of Ellie's head as he says, "You be good, okay?"

When his daughter giggles at the feel of his stubble, he grins and leans over even further to push his face into her little neck.

"Daddy!" Ellie yelps with laughter, trying to push him away.

"Have you seen the wine cellar yet?" Sara asks Felicity.

"No," Felicity replies, and then the words hit her. "Wait, there's a wine cellar here? What am I saying, of *course* there's a wine cellar."

Sara laughs. "Ollie, you've gotta take her down there."

"Come on," Oliver says, stepping back, pulling Felicity with him. "It won't take that long, I promise."

"*No*," Sara says, giving Oliver a meaningful look. "Take as long as you need."

Oliver doesn't reply and whatever Sara sees on his face makes her roll her eyes at him. He ignores her though, pulling Felicity into his side. He can't explain it, not exactly, but he knows both what Diggle and Sara are aiming for and what Felicity is feeling at the same time. He doesn't want to leave Ellie anymore than she does, but he also knows a few minutes alone with each other is more than needed. And wanted. God, it's wanted.

And the important part is that they *have* a few minutes to do just that.

"We'll be right back," Felicity says over her shoulder.

"You better not be," Diggle replies as Sara reiterates, "Take your time."

"Take your time!" Ellie yells after them, prompting Oliver to chuckle.

They pause at the entrance to the kitchen again, watching Ellie scramble onto Diggle's lap. As he turns to say something to Sara, Ellie reaches into his bowl and scoops up a strawberry. She pops it into her mouth just as Diggle looks at her.

"Hey now!" Diggle mock-protests, pulling the bowl away from her. "Ice cream thief!"

"It's sharing!" Ellie laughs. "I'm a really great sharer!"

Diggle snorts at that just as Sara looks up, catching them.

"*Go*," she orders.

And they do.

The idea of time alone for just the two of them is incredibly appealing, but still, leaving Ellie behind feels *wrong*. As much as he *very much* wants a few moments with just him and Felicity, it's surprisingly hard to walk away from Ellie, which is ridiculous because she just *in the kitchen* in the same house.

Had they actually been talking about going out on a date together? Because wow, if leaving their daughter to go *downstairs* is hard, Oliver isn't quite sure how they're going to manage a dinner out with just the two of them…

Or…

An idea forms in his head, but before he can suggest it, Felicity says, "I feel selfish."

"You're not selfish," Oliver instantly replies. "And I wasn't kidding about the wine cellar, it's right here."

As Oliver opens a door, flipping on a light that illuminates a set of stairs that goes deep into the foundation of the house, Felicity shakes her head, pausing before they can go down.

"I *want* time alone," Felicity says, resting her hands on his chest. "Like… *a lot* - like a lot a lot, like sometimes when I let myself think about being alone with you I will do just about anything to do just that a lot…" Oliver chuckles, wrapping his arms around her. "But leaving Ellie, especially with everything that's going on… What if she-"

"Needs us?" Oliver finishes for her. "I feel the same way, Felicity, trust me. But it's not selfish, okay? Digg and Sara can keep her safe. And she's happy."

Felicity smiles, clearly remembering the scene they'd just left. "Yeah."

"And they have a point," Oliver continues, pulling her closer, swaying with her slightly. "We haven't had a lot of time to ourselves. Any, actually."

"That's true," she whispers, biting her bottom lip.

"And while seeing our future in front of us so clearly is *amazing*, we also deserve to enjoy the present a little bit." Oliver looks at her, his eyes dancing over her face, letting himself revel. "We deserve some time for just us, to become the parents she has one day. We deserve a first date…" She slowly grins, leaning into him more, relaxing into his embrace. Oliver smiles, his voice lowering, just for her as he adds, "And a tenth date, and a *fiftieth* date." Felicity laughs, making his smile widen as her face lights up. God, she's so *beautiful*. "Zoom doesn't get to take that from us. Neither do Blood and Isabel. That's ours."

It's true, and as it settles over her, it brings a peace and calm he hadn't really expected to be able to give her. Felicity stares at him, almost like she's drinking him in. Her eyes are full of wonder, warmth… happiness… *love*. It will never, ever cease to amaze him how lucky he is to have her in his life, by his side.

Before he can say just that, Felicity pushes herself up onto her toes to kiss him, long and soft, her hands cupping his face. Oliver sighs, melting against her, holding her tighter as her thumbs brush over his scruff.

"Okay," she breathes after they part, her lips brushing against his.

"Okay?" he asks, his voice coming out more gravelly than he'd expected.

"Okay," she confirms with a content smile and another kiss, one that takes his breath away. His skin tingles with anticipation, a shiver falling down his spine. It's *perfect* so damn *perfect.* Felicity's next breath is shaky, and it makes his heart soar that he can affect her as much as she does him. "So… first date, huh?"

Oliver hums his agreement, nuzzling his face against hers. "I have an idea."

"What sort of idea?"

"One that involves…" Oliver kisses her again. "Wine… a blanket… cheese…"

Felicity giggles. "Like a picnic?"

"Exactly like a picnic." He kisses her lips, but he doesn't stop there, dropping soft kisses on her cheek, her nose, her brow before he works his way back down the other side. "Let's do one thing at a time. First, the wine…"

Felicity smiles as he nods, giving him a breathy, "Okay," because she knows exactly what he's doing. She leans into him, closing her eyes. "And then?"

"And then we'll get some food," he whispers. "And then we'll check on Ellie."

Felicity looks up at him, shaking her head with a small smile. "I love you."

"I love you."

They kiss, this one lasting longer, but not nearly long enough at the same time. As the seconds pass, as they slowly push themselves even closer, the world around them slowly fading, the air around them grows warmer, filling with the promise of the future.

Their future.

With a strangled whimper, Felicity finally pulls back, settling back on her heels. She keeps her hands on his face, her eyes sparkling with blatant affection as she whispers, "Why don't you take me on the last first date of my life?"

Well… when she puts it like that…

"I would be happy to," he replies.

Chapter End Notes

#RememberChapter20

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is long and mostly sexual content. If either of those things aren't for you, we recommend skipping it. For the rest of you... enjoy! Also of note, we blatantly disregard a bit of 2.5 comic canon for our purposes. We thought it worked better that way. Now... on with the fic!

The wine cellar is *huge*. Like ridiculously huge. Like her-entire-apartment-could-easily-fit-inside-this-space kind of huge. It's all artfully wine-stained wood recycled from used oak barrels and accented in brushed nickel hardware. The walls are meant to look like they're carved out of the ground, but Felicity's fairly certain that's merely an effect created by imported stone and an absurd amount of money. The most important thing about the space, though, is that there are rows and rows of wines in the carefully temperature-controlled basement, racked neatly, waiting for the perfect moment when they've reached their full potential. They aren't even dusty, meaning someone comes down and takes *care* of the wine. Moira Queen probably has a sommelier on retainer.

It's *beautiful*... and it's probably because Felicity's having a tiny emotional crisis that she thinks that.

Oliver's chuckle echoes from behind her.

"Beautiful, huh?" he asks as he sidles up next to her. Great, so she's slipped right into speaking her thoughts. He slips his arm around her waist as he follows her gaze. Oliver kisses her temple, something he seems to have picked up in the last day that she really, *really* likes. "I think an emotional crisis is worthy of wine."

"I wholeheartedly agree." Felicity leans into him and he accepts her weight completely, his arm tightening around her, holding her securely against him. Her heart flutters, knowing she could drop right then and he wouldn't let her touch the ground. She sneaks her hand around to cover his and he moves so their fingers are laced together. "Does it still count as an emotional crisis if it's practically a constant state of freak-out?"

Oliver smiles. "I think that's what they call being a parent." He kisses her again. "And considering we just found this out… what, two days

ago? I think we're doing okay. Alright…" He takes a deep breath, looking around. "Let's find some wine."

"Right," Felicity says with a nod. "Wine. For our date."

Date. Her heart flutters all over again, but for a very different reason. When they'd talked about it yesterday, it'd been a thing that would happen eventually. She hadn't really let herself think about the idea of actually getting dressed up - specifically wearing something *for him* - or of going to a restaurant, sitting down, eating and drinking, talking about… first-date things. There was too much going on to think about it - Ellie being at the very top of that list - but now, now that they're actually doing it…

She's *nervous*.

A date. With Oliver Queen. *Oh wow*. She feels a little silly, because really, they've done a lot of things that far surpass first-date status - not counting the whole *they have a kid together* thing or that they've bared more to each other by the simple fact of working together in the vigilante business, but also that they've already made out, they've done other *things*… they've already said *I love you*. And yet, she's still nervous, and the more she thinks about it, the stupider she feels.

This is *Oliver*.

But also… *this is Oliver*.

Felicity takes a slow breath, but it does nothing to appease the butterflies working themselves into a frenzy in her stomach.

Oliver suddenly curls himself around her, wrapping both his arms around her waist, pulling her flush against him so her side is plastered to his front. Her eyes flutter shut as he presses a kiss to her cheek - did he always smell this *good*? - before his lips find her ear. If it'd been his intention to distract her from the uncomfortable idea of leaving Ellie, she has to admit he's doing a very fine job of it.

"You okay?"

His breath against her ear should *not* make her feel like that.

Felicity nods a little too rapidly. "Yeah." She doesn't sound that fine. She sounds breathless and worn. "Why?"

Oliver moves one of his hands to her arm. His skin is *hot*, making her

fiercely aware of him in a way that she wasn't just a second ago. He slips his hand down until he's cupping her elbow, his calloused fingers gently rubbing back and forth. His touch is deliciously rough from where he grips his bow, from the hours he's spent making arrows, the hours training without any tape to protect his skin. It's a sharp contrast to how he handles her, making her forget how to do anything but *feel*.

"You're trembling," he whispers.

Felicity's stomach swoops.

His voice is a low rasp, and her next breath gets stuck in her throat as Oliver moves his hand slowly, up and down, in what she's sure is supposed to be a comforting move, but it's *not*. It's *more*, and it sends a lick of fire across the surface of her skin. It's jarring, how quickly they've gone from nothing to everything, from holding each other and both of them being fine to *this*… to the wild flush creeping up her neck and over her cheeks, to the shiver that slices down her spine like a thin knife, to the over-awareness of *him* where he stands, his stubble soft where it scrapes against her cheek, his lips scorching, his entire body so close.

When she shifts, turning further into him, she feels the insistent press of his growing arousal against her hip.

Felicity's heart stumbles all over itself in a mixture of anticipation and trepidation as her thoughts stutter to a stop.

A minute, that's how long they've been down there. One minute of talking about her desperate desire to not be away from their daughter and then the wine… one minute of finally being alone with him and already she's about to lose it. Already she's *aching* for him, like the pause button they'd hit last night has disappeared, leaving her needing to feel more.

It suddenly hits her that they haven't really had a moment to do this, to just… *exist*. To simply feel, to *be* with each other, to savor the present. They've had moments, sure, but there's always been something else under the surface - Ellie's mere existence or the fight with Slade, the lies they'd had to tell the press or Zoom's attack… there'd always been something else.

But now it's just them.

And it's *overwhelming*. She has no idea how to handle it.

He'd said something… about…

Trembling.

God, he's right. She is trembling. A lot. It's one part nerves, one part the desperate urge to get her hands on him and a healthy portion of need to feel his on her.

"Well," Felicity finally breathes, the sound coming out in a choked gasp. "It's… uh…"

Cold. That's what she'd wanted to say, aiming for cheeky, but the word fails her. When she doesn't finish her thought, she feels his lips curl into a smile where they're still pressed to her ear. Oh yes, he knows exactly what he's doing. And it's working… for both of them. Her shoulder is pressed to his chest, right over his heart, and his is pounding just as hard as hers is. When Felicity unconsciously presses herself closer, nuzzling him, he sighs, sinking into her.

Felicity feels the hard bulge in his pants actually *grow* with his desire. For *her.*

A slow rush of excitement fills her and Felicity bites her lip, the press of her teeth against the flesh grounding her some.

"You are *distracting*," she finally says, releasing her abused lower lip from her teeth.

"Am I?" he asks, amusement lacing his tone. "I'm sorry." He doesn't sound the least bit repentant and that's only emphasized when he takes a step, moving her with him… right towards a wooden pillar.

When Felicity realizes what he's doing, realizes how blatantly obvious he's being, she giggles, which makes him chuckle. She suddenly feels light as a feather. She *lets go*, lets him catch her, hold her in a way she never has before. Everything is still very new, very fresh, but it's *not* at the same time, because it's them. It's *freeing*, and it's quickly becoming addicting.

She wants *more.*

"Oliver…" she whispers, running her hand up to his bicep. She tangles his shirt between her fingers, warmth pooling in the pit of her stomach.

"Hmm?" He moves her in his arms so she's facing him just as her back

meets the pillar. He instantly crowds her against it, pressing the full length of his body along hers. Felicity shudders. He's *hard*, everywhere - his muscles are solid, rippling under her touch; his chest is wide, his shoulders broad, his long muscled legs…

He presses her further into the pillar, his breaths coming out in short pants, matching the rapidly growing staccato of her own. The sound of blood pounding through her veins fills her ears as she wraps her arms around him, pushing her hands into his hair.

Oliver rolls his hips into her, the bulge in his pants pressing right against her center, sending a devastating wave of need through her.

"Oh god," Felicity gasps, the sound drowning out his moans as he does it again… and again. Oliver shivers, letting out a breathy whine that makes her bite her lip as his nose brushes over hers. God, even that is too much, like her skin's been electrified and every single touch sends little charges across every inch of her.

This is *different*. It's different than last night, different from the moments they've stolen over the last few days because now they know they can *have* what they want, they can take it… and they *will*.

Oliver surrounds her, taking over everything. They aren't even kissing yet and already she feels like the air's been stolen from her, like everything inside her has been rearranged to accommodate the stark sensations raining through her body.

God, if this is what it's like right now, what will happen when they do more?

They were down there for… something. Something that involved…

"Wine," Felicity suddenly whispers. "We need to find… wine."

"We're surrounded by wine," Oliver replies absently, sounding as breathless as she feels. "I'd say we found it."

"Yeah, but… we're supposed to be… *getting*… wine… and if you don't stop… we won't get-"

"We will," Oliver promises. "But just…"

His voice fades off, like he's having trouble stringing two words together, much less an entire sentence, and she's right there with him.

Felicity's painfully aware of his hands - one slips down to her hip and around, touching her backside just enough to make her sex clench. She moans, squeezing her thighs together, shivering when that sends a dull thread of pleasure through her. His other hand cups her cheek, angling her face up towards his. His lips brush over hers again.

"Oliver…"

"In a minute," Oliver whispers. "Just… a minute. I just want…"

They'd kissed barely a moment ago, they'd kissed a lot a moment ago, but this is insanely hotter for reasons she can't even fathom. The anticipation of it, the expectation, knowing what she'll get when they finally kiss again, when they finally give in… it's a special brand of torture, one she's never experienced before. She wants it to stop with a desperation that sets her on edge but at the same time, it feels *good*. So, so good, so…

"Felicity," Oliver sighs.

Fe-li-ci-ty.

God, she loves when he says her name like that, drawn out like he's savoring the feel of each syllable against his tongue. She shivers, fisting his hair, but he doesn't kiss her, not yet. He hovers over her, so tauntingly close…

His hips jerk against hers again, and Felicity tries to lift her leg to wrap around him but her dress is too damn tight. She wants to feel him pressed against her like her last night, feel the heavy hardness she's only getting hints of. Even if they're still wearing too much clothing, she doesn't care, she needs to feel him any way she can, grinding against her, his hips rocking in time with hers, *rubbing*… the way he had last night, the way he'd pushed her to that beautiful crest, the pleasure rising in a white hot burn inside her…

A flood of heat swamps her at the memory and it's her undoing. Felicity grips his hair in tight fists and pulls him down, meeting him halfway, rasping, "Oliver," before her lips cover his. She instantly opens for him and he doesn't waste a single second, angling his head to deepen the kiss. With a heavy groan, Oliver shoves her back against the pillar, both of them damn near ravaging each other in their haste to get closer.

The kiss is hard, rough, filled with unbridled desire and need, both of them giving and taking with equal abandon. Their combined gasps

and moans echo through the cellar, the rasp of her dress against the rough pillar, the squeak of his shoe on the floor as he pushes her further up the post.

God, *yes*, it's everything she's wanted, everything she let herself wonder about late at night in the cover of darkness, half lost to dreams; everything she found herself thinking about when she watched him training - on the salmon ladder, doing pull-ups from the ceiling, pushups on the ground, his skin glistening with sweat, his muscles rippling, especially when he used the training dummy… It's *everything* and Felicity gives into the onslaught just as much as she gives him her own, nipping at his lips as his chin scrapes over hers, his stubble leaving a delicious burn in his path. She'd loved his stubble before, but this is *carnal*, almost like he's marking her just as much as she's staking her claim on him.

Oliver's hands roam, leaving her nerves buzzing as he trails his fingers all over her, exploring. She's shockingly aware of how *huge* they are, and a shot of anticipation rings through her when he spans them over her ribs, his thumbs brushing against the underside of her breasts. He moves higher, following the gentle swell, and oh, they're so much more sensitive than they were a minute ago - they're heavier, responsive to his every touch…

His thumbs ghosts over her hardening nipples.

Felicity cries out, and he does it again, harder.

"Aah…!" she whimpers against her lips, shivering. She feels it in her breasts, her nipples tightening to the point of pain, and she whines helplessly, kissing him even more fiercely.

"God, *Felicity*," Oliver sighs, his voice rivaling that of his modulator. It's pure sexual need, and it sends another streak of heat through her. He covers her mouth with his again, swallowing the rest of the little noises she's making. He pushes his hands up her side, his thumbs following the gentle curve of her breasts. It's achingly slow and too fast at the same time, and the heady mixture has her gasping for air, her lungs burning with the need for oxygen.

Felicity pulls back abruptly, sucking in a breath so quickly that it makes her dizzy, her eyes rolling back into her head, her mouth falling in a soundless cry as he heads straight for her nipples…

She slams her head right into the pillar with a solid thud.

A burst of pain shatters inside her skull, and it instantly douses the cloud of lust they'd accidentally tripped into.

"Oh shit," Oliver breathes. "Are you okay?"

He pulls back to look at her, his heavy pants drifting over her cheek, his hand moving to the back of her head just as one of hers does. Their fingers tangle in her hair, dislodging her ponytail, both of them finding the place she'd hit. When they do, her face crinkles with pain as she whimpers, "Ow…"

"Are you okay?" he repeats.

Felicity makes a little noise, but before she can finish, the sound quickly morphs into a disbelieving laugh.

She giggles, her entire body shaking - it's partly the fact that she just ruined the hottest make-out session of her entire life by hitting her head and partly the pain that's positively radiating through her skull.

Oliver can't help but chuckle as he asks again, "Are you alright?" His fingers gently rub the spot, the pain fading oh-so-much quicker for that reason alone. "That couldn't have felt good."

"It didn't," Felicity replies, delirious laughter punctuating the words.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. He cups the back of her head and she sighs, leaning into the pillow he's made for her.

He's still chuckling under his breath at her.

"It's not funny," she says.

"No, you're right," Oliver agrees, nodding, but his smile doesn't go anywhere and she narrows her eyes at him, which only makes his smile even wider. "It's not."

A week ago, the thought of Oliver Queen grinning like an idiot, completely relaxed and at ease in her arms, his lips swollen from her kisses, his cheeks flushed, his eyes bright and mischievous… well, that thought wouldn't have even existed. Not in any real kind of way, anyhow. Felicity can't remember ever seeing this grin on his face before, and it makes her chest swell with happiness as much as it makes her want to smack him because of *why* he's grinning at her like that.

She shakes her head, tapping his lips with her finger. "You know, I'd probably believe you if that stupid dopey smile wasn't still on your face."

Oliver huffs out a quiet little chuckle, just for her, and he kisses the pad of her finger, his soft, moistened lips grazing her skin.

And just like that, the haze of need is back, like it'd never gone away. Which it hadn't, not really, because the full length of his body is still pressed against hers, and as his lips linger on her skin. She's once again completely aware of just how much of him there is… and how *hard* he is. How hard *all* of him is.

Her mouth goes dry, her eyes dropping to his mouth, his perfect, beautiful mouth. Felicity's never given herself the opportunity to really *look* at him, because before, it'd been so *wrong*. They hadn't been like that, and she'd honestly thought nothing would ever happen between them, definitely not like *this*.

But it *has* happened - it *is* happening - and for the first time ever, Felicity lets herself just study him.

Oliver Queen is a stunning man. She's always known this, but it's a different thing to take the time to really note it. He's gorgeous - his brow strong and cheekbones sharp, the harsh cut of his jawline accenting the strength he radiates so effortlessly. And his eyes, she thinks she could get lost in his crystalline blue eyes. They're darker now, his lids slowly growing heavy again, his pupils widening as he returns her gaze, adoration and desire shining back at her.

Felicity slowly moves to cup his cheek, running her fingers over his soft, warm lips. They part, a soft breath dancing over her skin. She traces the lines of his face, taking her time, memorizing all of him with the touch of her fingers, brushing over his mole, his nose, up and over his brow before drifting down to drag her nails through his beard. The only sound for a second is their soft breaths and the rasp of her nails dragging through his facial hair… and then she moves her hands further down, her eyes following her own movements.

She drags her nails down his neck - he swallows, his muscles tightening under her touch - and she bites her lip, sucking it into her mouth. Felicity doesn't miss his quick exhale or the way he slowly pushes them back into the pillar, until he's plastered against her again.

He doesn't do anything else though, letting her touch him however she wants.

She reaches for his collar, where his tie still hangs. She remembers him loosening it in the car earlier, remembers the quick way he'd undone the top button, letting his throat breathe as they'd left the press conference.

Felicity slowly undoes his tie the rest of the way, fingers working their way through the loosened knot as her eyes rise to his again.

The air practically sparks between them, making it a tangible thing that grows hotter with each passing second as she tugs the tie free.

Oliver stays perfectly still as she pulls on it until it's undone.

They never look away from each other as Felicity sprawls her hands over his chest, digging her nails in lightly. His face tightens minutely, just enough for her to see as his muscles contract under her palms. But it's the way his eyes flare with interest, the way his jaw clenches… *oh*, that strikes home how deeply she's affecting him.

She files that away for the future as she starts unbuttoning his shirt. The air around them grows thicker, and she only makes it to the third button down before she runs out of patience.

She has to touch him.

Felicity pushes her hands inside, slipping underneath his undershirt. He's *hot* - his skin burning her palms - and she gasps at the sensation. Her eyes never leave his as she runs her fingers over the scars she'd memorized long ago - they're still rough, like he never touches them - before she slides her hands up to his neck again.

It's only when she feels the taut muscles there and the way his jaw is clenched that she realizes how on edge he is.

And *he's* trembling now, like he's fighting himself, holding back, grasping at the barest bit of restraint he can hold onto.

"You're trembling," Felicity whispers, mirroring his earlier words. His only response is to narrow his eyes, pinning her in place - and wow, *that* does things to her.

Felicity shifts, moving her legs so one is pressed between his. His breath changes, shortening as she leans into the pillar, shimmying so her dress rides up…

"What are…" Oliver manages before gritting his teeth, his eyes

fluttering shut as he loses himself in her touch. He falls against her, like he needs to get closer. A powerful feeling rockets through her at the knowledge that she can do this to him - she *gets* to do this to him - and it positively explodes when she presses her leg up so her thigh brushes against his straining erection.

"Oh god," he moans, his hips jerking forward, rubbing himself right against her, making them both gasp. His hands slip around her to the pillar and he grips it tightly, whispering, "Felicity, if you don't stop, we're never leaving this cellar." His mouth is right next to her ear and the rush of breath across her skin makes her shudder, but the heady feeling of knowing *she's* the one compromising his usually stoic sense of self-control is more than enough to ground her.

She tilts her head with a soft, "Oh?" - angling herself so she can see the war for restraint playing out across his face.

Both of them know full well that staying down here isn't an option either of them want. Not right now. While the idea of it is incredibly attractive - *beyond* attractive, it's so appealing she can taste it - there's also a very large part of her that wants to get back upstairs to their daughter.

Still… she loves the feeling of him like this, so affected that he has to dig his fingers into the wooden pillar, probably leaving permanent marks with his nails in an effort to keep himself together.

Oliver slowly opens his eyes, staring at her with bone-shattering intensity. "Felicity…"

"Yes?"

"Not down here."

"Oh, but…" She shifts again, pushing her leg up as high as it can go. Oliver hisses, his hands flying to her hips to stop her.

"The first time I make love to you," he whispers, staring at her, "is going to be in a bed." She forgets how to breathe at the promise in his gaze. "And you'll be completely naked… bare beneath me." Oliver leans forward, simultaneously pushing himself against her leg while also managing to push the skirt of her dress up so his leg rubs against her inner thighs, making her shudder. "Where I can see…" His lips hover over hers as he finishes with, "And *feel* every inch of you."

Oh. *God.*

An image of her sprawled out on their bed upstairs, the sheets cradling her as he climbs on top of her, his eyes dragging down her naked body, quickly followed by his hands… his *tongue*…

"Not down here," she agrees, her voice cracking slightly.

He gives her a chaste kiss, the complete opposite of what they'd just done.

She's pretty sure he'd intended to move back after that, to step away, to pull himself together and let her do the same, except… except that's just not an option, not anymore. Something tells her it will never *be* an option - as long as there is an opportunity, they are going to take it.

"Oliver," she manages just before his lips crash into hers again.

Felicity moans, opening for him just as he does for her, their tongues meeting in the middle. There's remnants of the toothpaste and mouthwash she remembers him using that morning, but most of it is him, pure *Oliver*.

More, more, more…

But before it can escalate again, before they take advantage of that pillar, they force themselves to pull back.

"Not down here," Oliver repeats, shaking his head. She's not sure if he's saying it for himself, for her, or for both of them. Probably both, because if he keeps touching her like that, she won't want to stop again.

With ragged breaths, they let each other go.

Oliver sets her back on her feet, stepping back a few paces, his eyes never leaving hers. They slowly readjust their clothes, her smoothing out wrinkles that will definitely *not* be going away anytime soon as he buttons his shirt again. He yanks his tie off, crumpling it up and shoving it into his pocket. Felicity watches his every move, her eyes lingering on his tented pants.

Soon.

When she tugs her hair out to put back up again, he watches her just as intensely.

It's a miracle, really, that they keep their hands to themselves… even

though the sight of his mussed hair makes her hands itch to mess it up even more.

"So," Felicity starts, her voice hoarse as she finally looks around again. Frak, this wine cellar is huge. "Wine."

"Pick anything you want," Oliver says, shoving his hands into his pockets. She glances at him, noticing his hands are fisted tight, and the idea that he has to do that to keep himself from touching her again sends a thrill through her.

"Anything, huh?" Felicity asks, stepping up to one of the shelves. She ignores how liquidy her legs feel just as much as she ignores the evident wetness between her thighs as she picks up a bottle. When she sees the label, her eyes go wide and she spins to face him. "Do you know how much this costs?"

Oliver shrugs, a tiny smile pulling at his lips, his eyes barely glancing at it. It's the exact reaction she'd expect, considering. It actually reminds her of the little shrug he'd given her before their first mission together, when Diggle had asked her, "*You really have no idea how rich his family is, do you?"* She smiles at that, and Oliver cocks his head in question.

"Just remembering that auction," she explains, "with those jewels you…" Felicity snaps her fingers. "Bought like that." They share a smile before she turns back to the rack, putting the bottle back. "Alright, let's see…" She scans the rack, thinking that it has to be red when that too triggers a memory. Felicity turns back to him. "Was there ever actually a case of that Lafite Rothschild? The 1982?"

Oliver laughs, almost in surprise. "There was." And then he winces, a light blush coloring his cheeks. "Although… the scavenger hunt I was talking about was from about ten years ago."

"Oliver Queen," Felicity gasps in mock-outrage. "You bribed me with something you didn't even have."

"I was just going to buy it for you," he admits.

"Which you never did," Felicity points out and he ducks his head with a sheepish smile. She sees him scrunch his face up and it's so cute that she can't help but grin. "All that work for nothing. You forgot about it, didn't you?"

"No," Oliver says, looking up again. "No, I didn't. I did at the time," he

amends, and when she moves in to say, '*Aha!*' he stops her. "Which I will never, ever do again. But I remembered later." He smiles. "I actually thought of it in the middle of the night a few months ago." Felicity raises her eyebrows at that and Oliver rolls his eyes, chuckling. "Not… like that. Digg and I were out patrolling, and you were telling Digg over the coms the best way to get red wine out of carpet."

She remembers that night. She'd gone on to explain that she really didn't have *that* much experience with it, despite her step-by-step instructions, but she knew enough that the method she'd found online - with her own adjustments - worked really, really well. On clothes too. And bedsheets.

"I was thinking about you a lot then," Oliver says, his voice low.

Her stomach does the swoop-down-to-touch-the-floor thing that leaves her knees feeling unsteady. "You were?"

"I was." He stares at her, and Felicity swears it's like he's touching her all over again. She can actually *feel* his hands on her… at her waist and then on her hips… the path his thumbs had traced over her breasts, his mouth on hers…

Oliver licks his lips, adding, "I ordered a bottle, I couldn't find anywhere that sold a case of it. It was supposed to be shipped to Verdant actually. It should still be there."

"Is that so…" Felicity responds slowly. "Well, we should probably check in on the status of that."

"We should," he agrees. His eyes darken. "We definitely should."

Oliver grabs her hand to tug her towards him. He twists her so her back hits his chest and then he wraps himself around her again, pulling her flush against him. Her breath catches - he's still semi-hard, but when he presses himself against her backside with an insistence that has them both gasping, she feels the bulge starting to strain against his pants again. Felicity wraps her arms around his.

As if he'd never stopped touching her, the same heat cuts a wicked swath through her.

"You know…" Oliver's tongue darts out to her ear - he's no longer being coy or cute or aiming to distract her. Now it's just a blatant attack, one she's falling under at an alarming rate. "I think I want to

know what it tastes like on you."

"On… me?" she repeats in a daze, turning her face into his, seeking the delicious burn of his beard.

"Mm-hmm," Oliver whispers, nuzzling the side of her neck, making her shiver. It highlights her hard nipples and the very insistent throb starting to grow between her thighs again. "I was thinking about… spilt wine…" He drags his lips up the side of her throat. "And licking it up."

The thought of his tongue cleaning up stray lines of wine over her chest, her stomach… between her legs…

"Oh, god," she whimpers.

"But first…" He presses a hard kiss to the side of her neck and then he straightens. Felicity almost stumbles, but he doesn't let her go, keeping her steady as her eyes fly open. "We need to find some other wine for tonight."

Other wine.

"Right." Felicity nods. "Wine."

It takes her a minute to cool the buzz of need that has her on edge - he *had* to talk about actually *licking wine* off of her, didn't he?

"Wine," she says again, because that might be the only word her mouth is capable of forming at this point that isn't his name or "*oh God yes please"* and either of those options seem counterproductive at the moment. Or very productive, depending on how you look at it.

"Wine," he agrees, and when she looks at him, when she sees the satisfied little smirk playing on his lips, Felicity rolls her eyes, which only makes him chuckle.

She points at the opposite end of the aisle they're in with a stern, "You stay over there, mister."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ugh, him pretending to be all proper does nothing to help their situation. Why is him calling her '*ma'am*' a turn on? Is it just everything he does? She sort of thinks it might be.

"I mean it."

Oliver just nods, but before she can go to her end, he grabs her for one more kiss.

She feels it all the way down to her toes before he lets her go again.

For the next few minutes, they simply look. At wine, not each other, which is something of a victory. Felicity points out things about the bottles she's looking at as Oliver mostly meanders near her, patiently waiting for her to make a choice.

Choosing only *one*, though, is turning out to be an impossible task.

Felicity's about to grab a random bottle and declare that the winner when he breaks the silence.

"So…" he starts, pulling her attention. He's picking at a wine label before looking at her again. "Who's Cooper?"

Everything inside her freezes.

That is the very last thing she's expecting - *literally* the last thing - and she has no idea how to respond to it.

Felicity pauses, vaguely realizing her hand is still grazing the bottle she'd been about to pick up. She pulls her hand back, making a fist.

Cooper.

Well, that was a part of her past that she'd never, ever wanted to touch ever again, although Hurricane Donna had sort of blown that desire to smithereens.

Felicity winces, remembering Donna's question - "*Is she Cooper's daughter, baby?"*

"You caught that, huh?" she asks, angling for more time before she has to answer. Forever. Forever would be preferable, really.

Oliver smiles, giving her a little shrug. "I was just curious." It's amazing how much she can suddenly spot the differences in his shrugs - the ones from earlier were fun, in the heat of the moment, designed to keep the light mood going, but this one… this one is the opposite of nonchalant, despite the intent in his voice. "It just made me realize that I don't know that much about your life before you moved to Starling City."

That's crap and they both know it. How many nights had they spent

on the coms, filling the silence with inane chatter that usually involved silly stories from her life in Las Vegas and then at MIT? *A lot.* But none of them had involved Cooper. On purpose. She barely let herself think about him, much less talk about him. Because thinking about *that*… it still makes her stomach churn. It'd been easier to push past it earlier because telling her mother *everything* kind of took precedence, but now that it's just them, in the unassuming silence of the wine cellar…

Acid burns her stomach.

Oliver must be able to see that on her face because he instantly backtracks, licking his lips like he does when he doesn't want to push boundaries that aren't his to push.

"You don't have to tell me."

"No," Felicity says. She smiles, but it's tight. She reaches out to grip one of the wine racks. "I want to."

And, to her surprise, it's true. Despite the fact that it's making her feel like she's ripping open a wound, she wants him to know. It's another reminder of just how much has changed over the last few days. She wouldn't have been this open to letting him in like this a few days ago.

When Oliver's eyebrows go up slightly, his eyes widening with interest, she finds herself wondering what he's been thinking since Donna brought Cooper up - the thought of anyone *but* Oliver being the father of her child is like a knife to the chest; Felicity wonders if Oliver felt the same way when Donna asked her question, despite both of them knowing how ludicrous the idea was.

"Cooper," she says, "was my ex-boyfriend. In college."

His eyes soften as he repeats, "Was?"

"You heard my mom upstairs?" she asks, holding onto the wine rack like it's the only thing keeping her up. Which it is, sort of, because the more she starts chipping away at the memories, the more it starts to feel like she's turning inside out… but not for the reason she might have thought. At his nod, she says, "He died a few years ago."

"What happened?"

She opens her mouth to respond, but the words fall short, and when

they still refuse to come out, Felicity lets out an uncomfortable laugh instead. She hasn't talked about Cooper with anyone, not since it happened. She feels her natural reaction to stop and tell him that he just died, to hide that pain, but at the same time, she doesn't want to. It's like the wound never healed right and she *wants* to open it back up, to let it heal correctly this time.

It's jarring and it leaves her momentarily speechless.

He watches her struggle and he takes a step towards her, regret ringing in his tone as he whispers, "Felicity, you don't…"

"It's okay," she says, cutting him off. "I want to. Strangely enough. It's… I just haven't ever talked about it." She lets out a self-deprecating laugh. "I barely let myself think about it, much less… use words."

Oliver doesn't say anything, waiting, and she takes complete advantage of it, trying to organize her jumbled thoughts. After a second though, it proves futile. *Screw it.* She just starts talking, telling him the first things that come to mind. How she met Cooper, how he was basically perfect for where she was at that point in her life for a lot of reasons that really, really don't apply to now… most especially because of how they spent their time. She tells him about the 'hacktivist' group she fell into with him and his roommate, tries to explain the things they could do, the things they did, trying to save the world one hack at a time.

"I guess…" Felicity pauses and then shakes her head. "I guess you could say it was my first attempt at being a hero."

That makes Oliver smile and he closes the distance between them, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Felicity lets go of the wine rack to grab his shoulders.

When she hesitates again, Oliver gently prods her. "So what happened?"

It comes out silted at first as she describes their last hurrah, including how Cooper ended up taking the fall for her.

"But he was the one who erased the loans."

"And I was the one who gave him direct access to do it," Felicity replies, her voice growing heavy. "It wasn't just him." He pinches his lips in placation and she closes her eyes. "Sorry, I'm not… I guess I'm

not… It was just so stupid, and I was so *mad* when he did it, when he… and then he told them he'd written the virus, and I…"

Oliver's voice is soft as he asks, "So what happened to him?"

"He, uh…" Felicity takes a deep breath, swallowing past the lump in her throat. She's never told anyone *how* Cooper died, she's never said the words out loud… "He hung himself before the sentencing."

"Oh…" he breathes. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." She takes a deep breath, letting it out in a heavy gush as she shakes her head. "I haven't talked about Coop in a long… *long* time, and it's… It's weird."

"I'm glad you told me," Oliver whispers, holding her closer. She leans into him.

"Me too." Felicity smiles, and this one is real, reaching her eyes as she looks up at him. "I've kept all that in for so long. I kinda feel like I… I don't know, let go of something."

Oliver nods. "I know the feeling."

Felicity thinks back to the other morning in the pillow castle, when he'd been trying to explain how he felt about Laurel and Sara.

She believes him.

"Well." Felicity chuckles dryly. "Nothing like talking about old lovers to get into the romantic mood." Oliver huffs out a quiet laugh as she turns the word 'lover' over in her mind. "Lovers. It sounds creepy no matter how you say it." That makes him chuckle even more, and Felicity looks up at him. "I hope I didn't bring the mood down."

Oliver shakes his head, the soft look he's giving her going nowhere. "You didn't." But then the look on his face changes and she raises her eyebrows in question. He presses his lips into a thin line before saying, "This will probably sound incredibly selfish, but…" Felicity furrows her brow as he sprawls one hand across her lower back, the other cupping her face. He stares at her, his thumb tracing her cheek. "I want you to know that whatever experiences you had to go through, I'm glad that you did."

Emotion chokes her.

"Because they shaped the person you are today." Oliver smiles. "And you know how I feel about her."

His words wash over her, through her, and she *lets* them. They cast away the residual darkness, leaving her feeling scrubbed clean. He's not trying to make it better, he's doing something she didn't even realize she needed - he's telling her that even though it sucks, it made her who she is. And he *likes* that person. It's an acceptance that's bone-deep, and it makes her heart swell with love for him.

Felicity bites her lip, a pleased flush skating over her cheeks as she leans into his touch, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"The same thing applies to you, you know," she whispers.

Oliver's face tightens slightly, but he doesn't try to hide it. He's trying to be just as open as she was. Instead, he gives her a simple nod, a smile, and then he kisses her.

It's gentle, and it resonates deep within her.

Felicity hums when they part. She presses her forehead to his for a moment before finally stepping back. She doesn't let him go though, keeping her fingers tangled with his, pulling him with her as they wordlessly turn back to the wine racks. She's pretty sure neither of them are really looking at the bottles anymore, but there's something comforting in the movement, both of them content to just *be* with each other.

They make their way to the next aisle, which is wider, like a row was removed, and in its place is a long, low table. The wood is clean, dust-free just like the bottles, and Felicity runs her free hand over it as she looks at the wine.

"Since we're on the subject of exes," Felicity says, segueing. She stops, looking at Oliver. "How'd it go with Laurel this morning?"

"It went fine." Oliver's eyes dance over the wine. "Better than I thought it would, to be honest. She was shocked," he adds, "when I told her Ellie was from the future."

"That isn't something that generally comes up in casual conversation." Felicity pauses. "Unless you're us."

Oliver smiles at that before his eyes glaze over, like he's back in the room with Laurel.

"It was interesting," he says. "For one reason, at least."

"What?" Felicity whispers when he doesn't continue right away.

"When I saw how she reacted, I just… I never…" Oliver looks at her. "I always felt like there was this weird inevitability between Laurel and me. Like our lives were on a specific path, and we were going to follow it no matter what. She felt it, too, and she…" He laughs dryly. "She was far more ready for it than I ever was. Even though it felt like it was written in stone, I knew it wasn't for me. Some part of me never wanted that future with her. And I ran. Every single time, I always ran. And if I wasn't running, I was doing something to sabotage it, anything to push her away, to push that future away, because I *knew* it wasn't what I wanted, even if I wasn't willing to face it."

Oliver looks at her and her eyes widen at the bright intensity in his eyes as his gaze bores into her.

"But with you, Felicity… even before we knew about Ellie, before I knew that I could ever have a future with you, that I could even be happy at all… I *knew*. I knew that you were it for me."

Whoa.

Felicity takes a shaky breath, and she doesn't realize that her eyes are filling with tears until she blinks, almost sending one falling down her cheek.

Oliver pulls her into his arms again, wrapping her up until there's nothing left but *them*.

"Something I learned on the island…" he whispers. Her heart skips for an entirely different reason - he never, *ever* volunteers information about the island. *Ever*. "I had to learn to trust my gut. I had to learn to listen to my instincts, follow them, something I wasn't very good at before the Gambit went down. Obviously."

A ghost of a smile tugs at her lips, but that's all she manages, transfixed by his eyes.

"I knew the second I met you that I could trust you," Oliver says. "With anything. That's why I kept going back to you. I didn't think about it at the time. All I knew was that there was a little voice in the back of my head, the same voice that had saved my life more times than I can count, and it was telling me that you were a safe haven. That you were *my* safe haven. And you are, Felicity. I've never felt as safe as I

do when I'm around you, and that is just… it's a feeling I never really thought I'd ever have, not ever."

Felicity freezes, pure elation and amazement filling her.

Oliver chuckles as he shakes his head. "I didn't even know what it was at first, I didn't recognize it, until I realized I only felt that way around you." He lets out a sharp breath, his face growing somber. "I can't be grateful that Zoom's chasing Ellie through time, that something evil like that is trying to get my daughter, because I would burn the entire world to ash before I let anything happen to her, to keep her from ever having to face that… but I can't be sorry that it's brought me this. *You.* My family. And I…" Oliver cups her face. "I don't think I would've ever done anything, Felicity. I know Ellie's existence says we do, but I don't know how I would have ever gotten past myself, because I was so *sure* that I couldn't have you, that I could never be this happy. That I wasn't allowed *this*…"

A tiny, joyful sob slips past her lips as Felicity smiles up at him.

"But I am," Oliver finishes. "I am so happy and it's because of you, it's all because of you, and I… I love us. I love *you*."

"Oh, Oliver," she whispers, the next sound she makes coming out in a mix between a laugh and a sob that has him running his thumbs over her cheeks. "I love you. I love you so much, I can't…"

He doesn't let her finish. It's like the second he hears those magical words, his restraint *snaps*.

Oliver's mouth covers her, swallowing the rest of her words, his fingers holding her so tightly it hurts, but at the same time she barely feels it. No, all she feels is him where he's pressed against her, and suddenly she can't wait any longer. She doesn't want to.

Felicity pushes herself up onto her toes, needing to get closer, winding her arms around him as she whimpers against his mouth, both of them opening up for the other at the same time.

The need from earlier crashes through both of them, only this time it's so much stronger. It's more demanding, beating a heady drum through Felicity's veins that she's completely powerless against, and it's one that has her suddenly clawing at him, pulling herself closer, pushing her hand into the collar of his shirt, needing to feel *more.* She needs to feel his skin against hers, his naked skin, and the second that thought pushes into her head, she's moving for his shirt buttons.

Oliver wrenches back with a desperate, "*God, Felicity…*"

Her lips are swollen and pulsing in time with her heartbeat, blood rushing in her ears. She's not done and she pushes herself up, her lips finding his pulse point. He smells like the soap he'd used earlier and the beginnings of the sweat he builds up after spending hours training… and god, he *tastes* even better.

Oliver groans, wrapping an arm around her, his other shooting out to find…

The table.

Before she can fully comprehend that, Oliver grips her waist and he lifts her up like she weighs absolutely nothing, making her stomach drop for two totally different reasons - the sudden loss of gravity that leaves her spinning; but the dominating reason is her visceral reaction to his brute strength. It lights up a part of her she didn't think she had… but oh, she does, and it makes her need for him skyrocket as he sets her down, pushing himself between her legs.

Felicity tugs her dress up, nearly ripping the material in her haste. She doesn't take note of the way it tugs at the skin on her thighs - she doesn't *care* - because she knows the instant she's able to feel him between her thighs again…

He presses himself against her hot core, and she shudders, her head falling back with a harsh, "*Ooh…!*"

His head falls against her chest, his harsh breathing dancing over her increasingly damp skin, and Oliver pulls her closer to the edge of the table. He thrusts his hips forward, and *oh god*, she sees *stars*.

Felicity's hands seek blindly for his hips to urge him even closer. She grasps his shirt into tight fists, rocking against him, making him choke on what might have been her name. He suddenly digs his fingers into her hips, holding her still as he starts a thrusting motion that has her wet panties sliding right against her tender slit.

"Oh… don't stop, Oliver, that's… *please*…"

God, he's so *hard* and it's like last night only *better*.

But she wants *more*, so much more… and he has the same realization at the same time.

"Damn it," Oliver groans, his hips stilling. He lets out a short laugh and it sounds so uncomfortable and full of restraint that Felicity almost reaches between them and grasps him through his pants. But he's already moving away from her. Felicity watches him, her eyes dropping to his pants - he's hard, and there's a light wet stain from where he'd been rubbing her through her panties. Desire fills her, making her fingertips tingle, and he sees it. Oliver shakes his head, scrubbing his face before saying, "We have to get the hell out of this wine cellar."

"No." Felicity can only shake her head in firm denial. "Or not."

She grabs the front of his shirt and yanks him back between her thighs, her lips falling hard against his as she pulls her legs up, wrapping them around him. Oliver groans desperately, giving as good as she does and soon…

With a shake of his head, Oliver pulls back just enough to whisper, "The first time I have sex with you isn't going to be on this table, Felicity."

"I don't care where we are," Felicity replies hurriedly, kissing him again. He whimpers, giving in… but then he pulls back *again*. "*Oliver*." He pulls his hands off her and they land with heavy thuds on each side of her hips, his muscles coiling, like he refuses to move. Felicity reaches up to cup his face. "I don't need a bed, Oliver, you are enough… wherever we are. You are so, *so* much more than enough."

"Felicity, let me…" His voice is full of the same desperation she feels. She leans forward, her lips brushing over his. "I want it to be perfect, and this…"

"Anything with you is perfect," she replies. "*Anything*."

Oliver groans again and his hands squeak against the table, like he's fighting himself from grabbing her.

"I need it," he rasps. "I need to see you sprawled out on a bedspread, your hair… spread out, and…"

She huffs out a little chuckle - who knew it was Oliver Queen who would be the hopeless romantic between them?

"I think we'll have time for that, you know," she replies, her voice lowering at the heady thought. Her eyes drop to his mouth, her thumb running over his bottom lip. "This is just the beginning, Oliver."

A helpless grin pulls at his lips and he nods. But he's not swayed, not even a little. He doesn't say anything as his forehead falls against hers… and then, like they have a life of their own, his hands find her thighs. Her very naked thighs.

Felicity forgets how to breathe, her muscles twitching like he'd just shot an electrical current through her. His fingers start moving, up… up… drifting over the surface of her skin and they both look down, watching their progression.

Her skirt is bunched up around her hips in a haphazard mess, her thighs creamy in comparison to the dark material. Her legs are spread open, just as much as they can be where her knees are glued to his hips.

"I want to take my time," Oliver whispers.

Felicity shudders. His fingers brush against her outer thighs, making her legs clench around him before he moves them up. They mirror each other, doing the same thing to each leg, driving her absolutely *crazy*. His fingers slowly make their way down…

"Oliver…"

"I want to…" he continues, ignoring her as his fingers brush her inner thighs, "*kiss* every inch of you… *taste* every inch…"

Felicity moans.

Oliver doesn't give her a chance to do more before he's pulling back, one hand cupping the side of her neck, urging her to look at him as he slips the other between her legs.

The instant their eyes meet, his hand moves just enough so his fingers graze the front of her panties. She jerks - it's not a lot, and it shouldn't *feel* like a lot, but it does, and it's more than enough to send a sharp streak of pleasure straight to her core. His eyes darken with something carnal that she feels in her bones and she wants *more*.

Felicity's too far gone to appreciate that he's waiting for her, like he wants to make sure what he's doing is okay, like he wants *her* to dictate how this goes, not the other way around… but she's just too far gone.

She reaches for him mindlessly, grabbing his shoulder, digging her nails into his muscle as her other hand joins his, pushing his hand

closer.

The instant his fingers press solidly against her, Felicity cries out, the sound quickly dissolving into a low moan. It's shockingly more erotic feeling his hand move against hers, knowing how he's touching her and that she's holding him to her wet sex, urging him on, encouraging him.

She's so incredibly sensitive, from the constant back-and-forth after last night, the heightened need, the damn life or death thing that keeps rearing its stupid, ugly head… she's so sensitive and *ready* - she's been ready, from the second he'd asked her if she was okay earlier.

Felicity spreads her legs, her eyes never leaving his as she pushes his hand further between her thighs. It's so intimate, powerful - *intense*, and she quickly loses track of anything but his fingers stiffening slightly as he presses them more firmly against her soaked panties. Her hips rock, sending his fingers sliding right over her clit.

"Yes," she whimpers, nodding rapidly. "Yes, yes, *yes*." Her eyes flutter shut, nearly closing, but she keeps them open, because she can't look away from him. She doesn't want to. There's something about the way he's watching her, like he's been dying of thirst and he's suddenly found water. She feels like he might consume her whole.

Oliver pushes his hand closer until it's flush against her. His palm is so hot and hard, and she feels it perfectly through her thin panties. He curls his fingers slightly, slipping over her clenching entrance, and she gasps as they touch the tender nerves there, making her inner walls squeeze tightly.

She actually *aches* to feel him between her legs, filling her.

Oliver keeps his hand there, letting her ride him. He moves, so slowly it's torture, testing her reactions, seeing what she likes.

It's *amazing* and divine and erotic and intense and *hot* and she can't *breathe* but she doesn't care… and when he pushes his hand further down, the heel of his hand is perfectly level with her clit.

"Oh god!" she cries, her hips jerking against him. "Right there, right there!"

Felicity grips his hand to keep him still and grinds down on him, something dark and heavy starting to coil deep inside her. It's hot, a growing fire, spreading through her body at a pace she can't keep up

with. Her hips rock against him, her eyes never leaving his - she's so incredibly vulnerable, baring everything for him… *wanting* him to see it all.

It only heightens her pleasure, taking her to a level that's beyond physical.

Oliver leans in closer. He's whispering something she can't hear over the roar in her ears. He curls his fingers again, but this time he presses them up through her panties and they slide between her nether lips. The pressure of his hand alone had been enough to make her dissolve into a quivering mass of want, but the feel of his roughened fingertips sliding against her needy flesh...

"Yes, yes… *Oliver*…"

Felicity's back arches, her hips moving faster, his hand meeting her thrusts as they hold on to each other.

She's so close…

Her thighs start to tremble from the intensity of the orgasm building, her muscles coiling in preparation.

"Don't stop, don't stop," she gasps, over and over, and just as she reaches her peak, the pleasure spiking so harshly it leaves her breathless, she cries out his name, loud enough that it echoes through the wine cellar… and then time suspends for a split second. She's suddenly aware of everything, from the woodsy smell of the wine racks, the combination of their sweat, his hot skin through his dress shirt where she's holding onto his shoulder, his hand gripping the side of her neck, his eyes never leaving hers, his lips moving as he whispers her name like a litany, his brow twisting in concentration and his own need…

It all amplifies the intimacy of the moment to astounding levels…

Felicity breaks.

A breathless scream rips out of her as she comes, pleasure shooting through her, carving her from the inside out. It sends her soaring just as much as it pulls her under, and the last thing she's aware of for those blissful seconds is Oliver catching her as she collapses and his whispered, "I love you…"

She isn't sure how much times passes, but when she finally opens her

eyes, she finds her face pressed into his neck, her fingers curled into his shirt, his arms wrapped around her.

"Wow," she gasps. She takes a breath, and even that is exhausting but it feels so good to *breathe*. "That was… wow."

"You okay?" he asks, pressing a wet kiss to her temple.

She laughs, a disbelieving little giggle that says everything she can't put into words just yet. "Yes. Yes, oh yes, I am… definitely okay."

Oliver chuckles. His hand slips up to cup her jaw, turning her face up to his. He kisses her, and it's soft and gentle and *perfect*. She sits up, using him to prop herself upright, her arms shaking slightly, like her bones have liquefied.

She shakes her head - because *wow*, that was *intense* and she had no idea it was going to be like *that* and what in the world was it going to be like when they actually had sex?

"Amazing," Oliver responds, kissing her again, stopping her from commenting about how the orgasm effectively removed her brain filter.

It's only after he pulls back, his hands still on her - probably because she looks as unsteady as she feels - that she realizes his stiff erection is still pressing against her thigh. And *oh*, that has a dark pleasure coiling right in her core.

Felicity licks her lips and raises an eyebrow, slipping her finger into the waistband of his slacks. "I think there's something else we have to do…"

"Oh no." Oliver grabs her hand, shaking his head. "I don't want to come in my pants again."

The open honesty and bluntness makes her grin. "I could take that as a compliment, you know."

"You should."

"But…" She moves for his pants again. "I wasn't thinking about in your pants, Oliver."

"Felicity…" He sucks in a quick breath, his face going slack with lust, his pupils dilating so quickly… but then he's reeling himself back in.

Oliver grabs her hand and gives her a quick hard kiss. "The next time I come, I want to be inside you."

If Felicity had honestly thought for one second that she wouldn't be ready to go again for at least a few minutes, she was wrong.

Very. Wrong.

Need whips through her, just as strong as before - no, *stronger*, because she's gotten even more of a taste of what it's like…

"And besides… I still owe you a date."

Date.

Felicity's heart flutters and she smiles. "That's right. Our last first date ever."

"Our last first date ever," Oliver repeats, grinning, as if he likes how those words taste. "Let's get the wine…" A kiss… "Some candles…" Kiss. "Some food…" He gives her one more kiss before finishing with, "And then let's go check on our daughter."

She will never get sick of hearing the phrase '*our daughter'* on his lips.

"That sounds perfect," Felicity replies.

A thrill of exhilaration sweeps through her at the thought of seeing Ellie, which is downright ridiculous, but she can't help it. She wants to sweep her up into her arms and rain kisses all over her until she's letting out that adorable little giggle of hers. It would turn into a sharp squeal full of joy because Felicity can see Oliver wrapping his arms around both of them, trying to kiss both their cheeks at the same time.

It's amazing how perfectly she can picture that.

Oliver gives her one more lingering kiss before he helps her off the table.

It takes Felicity a little too long to get her sea legs back and she holds onto Oliver a little longer than she intended - that's a damn lie - but he doesn't complain. Instead, he smoothes her hair down, gazing at her, his face softening. He's just as rumpled and unkempt as she is, his lips swollen from her kisses, his cheeks flushed, but at the same time… he's relaxed, almost nonchalant. It's slightly mind-boggling considering

what they'd just done - really, considering she was the only one who'd gotten off.

He looks completely content, like everything in his world is *right*, and it makes her emotional.

For a long minute, they stay right there, holding each other.

Oliver runs his fingers through her loose ponytail before he cups her face. Two thoughts pop into Felicity's head: one, she's going to have to re-do her hair again, and two, she can smell herself on him. That last one has another swift kick of need sparking in her chest and she grabs the collar of his shirt, pushing herself up onto her toes, finding his lips.

It's another several minutes before they finally pick two random bottles of wine and make their way upstairs.

The happy shrieks they'd walked away from are gone when they leave the wine cellar. It makes Felicity's heart jump, despite herself. It's entirely irrational, and she knows it, because they'd been down there for…

"What time is it?" Felicity asks. The sun has risen even higher in the sky, blasting through the open windows, flooding the hallway with light… a hallway with no clocks that she can see. An entire house full of things that are probably priceless and there isn't even a clock. It's like they *want* people disoriented, lost in the luxury. The thought isn't completely out there; she wouldn't put something like that past Moira Queen.

They're each holding a bottle of wine, and Oliver transfers his so he can lace his fingers through hers, his eyes instantly finding a tiny desk clock in one of the rooms they stroll past.

"It's a little past two."

Wow, they'd been down there for almost an hour. It definitely hadn't felt that long.

And the house is eerily quiet.

Oliver shakes his head, like he can read her thoughts, and tugs her closer. "Everything's fine."

Felicity's first reaction is, '*How do you know that?'* but she bites her tongue, because some part of her recognizes that she's freaking out just to freak out. They've been gone for a while, and now the house is silent, which is different from what they'd left. And she also just really, *really* wants to see her daughter. That's all.

"I know," she replies. "They could be anywhere, and we would've heard something, right? We weren't that far, although we were a little distracted and…" The stupid thought that maybe while she was making so much noise downstairs, someone up here might have screamed stomps through her head and she makes a quick, "Gah!" sound. She closes her eyes, letting her head drop on his shoulder. "I'm freaking out."

"You're freaking out."

"I can't believe how much I need to see her," Felicity admits. Oliver manages a soft, "Me too," before she's continuing, "And I'm kinda wondering if some of this is just me needing to see her to make sure she still remembers me. Which…" Felicity says, cutting him off when she feels his muscles tense, "I know is ridiculous. But it's still there. Because I'm a crazy person."

"No, I think I know what you're saying."

"It's like… it's hard to go from zero to sixty, and when I'm away from her, I realize how hard that is. We missed those years where we almost literally could not let her out of our sight because she was so incredibly helpless. Not that she isn't helpless now - I mean, she *is* scary agile and smart for a three-year-old. But before, there was the… bonding period." Felicity purses her lips. "We didn't get that."

"I feel a little cheated too," Oliver says, laying a quiet smile on her. She looks at him, and she sees the same weird sadness she's feeling lining his face. "We missed a lot."

"And it's even weirder because we technically *didn't*, you know? It's not like we did this on purpose or on accident or anything. Because we didn't even know she *existed* a few days ago. Still…"

"You know what I think?" Oliver asks as they reach the kitchen. "I

think trying to make sense of a situation that involves time travelling toddlers is a little useless."

Felicity snorts, pushing through the kitchen door. "Like that's gonna stop me."

Oliver chuckles as they both step in. Felicity's eyes instantly whip around the open space, looking for any sign of her daughter, but the only person in there is Raisa, who looks up from where she's cutting vegetables at the kitchen island.

"Miss Felicity and Mr. Oliver, hello."

"Hi, Raisa," Oliver replies as he takes the wine bottle Felicity was holding from her numb fingers and before he can finish, "Have you seen…" Raisa cuts him off.

"They're in the sitting room, watching television," the older woman says, a knowing smile on her face. Her eyes are on Felicity and when she turns to give her a grateful smile, Raisa raises a hand to stop her. "I completely understand, Miss Felicity."

"Thank you," she breathes.

Oliver's hand grazes her lower back. "You wanna go check on her, and I'll be right behind you?"

"Yes," Felicity says with an eagerness that makes Oliver grin. She turns to him for a quick kiss. "You get the food and I'll get the baby. Well, I won't *get* her, but I'll check on her. And she's not exactly a baby is she? But she is *my* baby, and…"

"Felicity," Oliver says before cutting her off with another chaste kiss. "Go."

"Right. Going."

With one last kiss - because she can't *not* kiss that man, it's quickly climbing her list of impossible things to not do - Felicity makes her way out of the kitchen. Raisa and Oliver's fading voices follow her out, Oliver asking her if there's anything quick and easy that he can take with him… but soon enough, his voice is gone and Felicity is drawn to the sitting room like it's the center of gravity. Which it is. Because that's where her daughter is, and it's only when she's away from her that Felicity really understands the power of that.

She's barely had her in her life, but Felicity already knows that Ellie is her entire *world*. Oliver is - and always will be - right up there, but nothing compares to her child, and maybe it's because of everything she's gone through, but it's especially strong right now, so strong that she walks a little faster.

The first thing Felicity sees when she enters the sitting room is that someone's drawn the curtains, casting the room in low glow that, thankfully, is less sinister than it is heartwarming. And it matches the scene that she walks up on. It takes Felicity all of one second to analyze the room, to see that Sara isn't there, but that Lyla has appeared - if Felicity wants to get technical, there *is* a Sara in the room, but she's the size of a bean in her mother's stomach - and she and Diggle are talking softly, barely above the noise coming off the television.

They both stop when they hear her.

"Hi, Lyla," Felicity says, aiming to give the other woman a soft smile, but she only has eyes for Ellie.

In fact, she barely catches Lyla's, "Hey, Felicity," because everything zeroes in on her daughter.

Diggle is half-sprawled out on a sofa, his head pillowed on the back, his legs angled so he's semi-horizontal, enough that the sleeping toddler on his chest has a place to lay.

Felicity bites her lip to keep in the emotional noise that wants to slip out as Diggle looks at her with a small smile on his face.

Ellie's so *tiny* sprawled across his enormous frame. And the sight of her there settles something in Felicity's heart, takes the edge off of her nerves. Because Ellie is wholly at peace, completely unconcerned with her own safety as she uses Uncle Digg as her mattress, and Felicity can think of nowhere in the world other than Oliver's arms that her little girl might be safer or more secure.

"Hey," Digg greets. He carefully checks his watch before raising an eyebrow. "That was quick. You two don't know how to take a break."

"We were gone for almost an hour," Felicity replies, tiptoeing over to them. Ellie's out like a light, her long hair a riotous mess, her dress wrinkled, a smudge of ice cream dried on her cheek. And she's drooling all over Digg's chest, so much that Felicity can't help but laugh. She leans over and presses a soft kiss to Ellie's temple,

smoothing her hair back before wiping the drool away. It's funny that earlier she'd hesitated when she'd seen the tears and dried snot all over Ellie's face after her nightmare, but now, it's like she's been wiping weird stuff off her daughter for her entire life. She doesn't even think twice, she just does it, drying her fingers on her own dress as she says, "You're going to be swimming here real soon, John."

Diggle snorts under his breath, looking down at the little girl. "She gets that from her mother."

Felicity crouches down before them as she says in an affronted whisper, "I do not drool."

"Right. And how many times have I come back to the foundry to find your passed out at your desk?" She moves to answer but Diggle cuts her off again, "And how many times did you wake up and yell at yourself because you didn't want a repeat of that one time you drooled all over your keyboard?"

"That's only happened, like… a few times." He chuckles, making Ellie's little body bounce up and down for a second. Her breathing barely changes; she's completely out. Felicity smiles, running her hand over Ellie's warm little back. It hits her that Moira and Donna are also MIA. "Have you seen my mom?"

Diggle shakes his head. "No, but I think Sara ran into her and Oliver's mom. I heard them talking in the hallway. Sara…" He chuckles. "She more or less explained where you two were and what you were doing, which I'm sure had them running in the opposite direction. I'm not sure where they are right now."

Felicity nods, choosing *not* to think about the fact that their mothers have disturbingly become instant Odd Couple-style bosom buddies or that Sara very likely implied heavily that they were doing… almost exactly what they'd been doing, actually.

Instead, she smiles down at Ellie, who doesn't stir. "I see that sugar came back with a vengeance."

"It did," Diggle agrees. He shifts, settling more into the sofa before raising an eyebrow at Felicity. "All the more reason for you to get the hell out of here."

Felicity blinks at the sudden dismissal. "What?"

He nods to the door she just came through. "Go find that brooding fool

of yours and enjoy the free babysitting."

"Digg-"

"Felicity," Diggle says, his tone a weird mix of exasperation and understanding. "If there is one thing that I've learned about being with someone when the stakes are so high that you can't tell up from down…" His eyes switch to Lyla with a knowing look that's so intimate and personal that Felicity almost looks away. "It's that you have to take those small moments. You have to appreciate them, because it's those few seconds that make all the damn drama later worth it." He looks at Felicity pointedly. "So get the hell out of here."

"Such a romantic, Johnny," Lyla adds.

"It worked for you, didn't it?" Diggle asks with a smirk, which makes Lyla huff out a soft, "Ha," which tells Felicity everything she needs to know about the meaning behind Diggle's words.

They met in a literal war zone, fell in love in one, got married in one, and from the few tidbits she's managed to get out of Diggle, the second things slowed down, they'd both realized they didn't know *how* to be with each other without a war. This was his way of telling her that while they took the long way to get there, he discovered that there is a way to beat that, to get around that, to rise *above* that. Because while she and Oliver have known each other for so long and have already shared so much, coming together like they have in the last few days… well, either they can take the route John and Lyla did, or they can go another one.

He's a strong advocate for another route.

"You're right," Felicity resolves. "You're very right."

"Of course I am. Aren't I always?" Diggle replies. Both Lyla and Felicity smack him at that and he lets out a plaintive, "Ow."

Felicity shakes her head at him, her eyes finding Ellie, before remembering the rest of the fun stuff that's happened. She turns to Lyla with a bright, "Congratulations. About the baby."

Lyla's eyes widen, like she's still not used to people knowing - which is understandable considering everyone basically told her that she was pregnant, thanks to a child from the future - but she still smiles. "Thank you. You too." Felicity's whole body damned near spasms because *what*? Lyla tilts her head toward Ellie and… well, *yeah*,

congratulations to her new baby, too. "This isn't exactly how I pictured telling everyone… although I do like what it's done to the big guy here."

Diggle's brow furrows. "What's that?"

"You've gone green every single time we've talked about this," Lyla says with a wry smile, her hand patting her stomach. "It's like hearing Ellie talk about her has made it more real. Now he's completely relaxed, where before he spent most of the time hyperventilating."

"I wasn't hyperventilating," Digg argues. "I was… preparing myself for running after a baby."

Lyla laughs, shaking her head at him as she reaches over to pat his thigh. "Okay, Johnny. Sure."

"I was. Babies are fast."

"Hey."

Oliver.

Felicity looks up just as he comes up behind her. She hadn't even heard him come in. He nods to Lyla and then Digg before his eyes find Ellie. The way his face softens makes Felicity's heart melt as his hand finds Felicity's shoulder before he leans over, dropping a soft kiss on Ellie's back. The toddler doesn't even move, but she does let out a heavier exhale, one that almost sounds like a little snore. It's so damn *cute*.

Felicity looks up just as Oliver looks at her.

The sudden intensity in his eyes has her heart skipping a beat. She blinks, her stomach dropping, but just as quickly as it's there it's gone and he's looking back to Diggle.

"Everything okay?" Oliver asks.

"Yes," Diggle replies with exaggerated patience. "And look…" Without jostling Ellie too much, Diggle reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, waving it at them both. "I've already got something queued up to send you if anything does go south. Which it won't," he adds when he sees Felicity's face fall. "Lyla's here and Sara, too."

"We've got you guys," Sara says from behind them. Felicity jumps. She

hadn't heard her either. Honestly, people were too light on their feet around here. Sara walks up, smiling at Ellie's sleeping form. "And we've got the munchkin. Get out of here."

"Get the *hell* out of here," Diggle amends.

A half-smile lights Oliver's face at that, his eyes finding Sara's. They share a look, one that says way more than what Felicity had just heard. Had they both come from the kitchen?

"Come on," Oliver says as he stands, offering Felicity his hand. She takes it and he pulls her up with him. He smiles at Diggle, and then Sara, and then Lyla. "Thank you, guys."

"Yeah, yeah," Sara says, rolling her eyes as she waves them. "Now go."

"We're going, we're going," Oliver says just as Felicity starts, "If anything-"

"Oh my god, you guys are horrible," Sara interrupts with a laugh. "We *know*."

Felicity and Oliver move at the same time, both of them touching Ellie's back. The little girl finally shifts, but it's just to scrunch her face up, her hand curling into a fist that she uses to rub her nose before she's still again.

"Bye, baby," Felicity whispers, earning a charmed smile from Diggle, a soft look from Lyla and a wave from Sara.

Oliver grabs Felicity's hand, and they finally leave.

When they reach the hallway, Felicity spots a large basket sitting in the middle of the floor. She can't help the dopey grin that crosses her face. He wasn't kidding about the picnic. An *actual picnic*. With a picnic basket. Who even owns a picnic basket? Excitement bubbles to life inside her all over again as Oliver picks it up.

"So where exactly are we going for our date?" Felicity asks.

His response is to give her a kiss. Felicity expects it to be a quick, simple one, a headway into what will probably be the best first date of her entire life, but it isn't quick, nor is it simple.

The second his lips touch hers, everything falls away but the feel of him pressed against her and suddenly they're back in the wine cellar,

when the only thing that existed was the insistent need that made her feel like she was burning from the inside out.

Oliver tugs her closer, wrapping his free arm around her, his large hand splaying across her lower back before he makes a tight fist in her dress as he holds her, leaning her back in his arms like he's dipping her.

She's never felt safer in her entire life.

When they finally break apart, Felicity is more than a little dazed.

"Oh… kay then. So…"

"I think we should go upstairs," Oliver says. "To our room."

A flood of nerves sets off her heart and Felicity's nodding before she can think twice.

"Upstairs is good. Upstairs is very… very good."

The second their door falls shut behind them, the latch sliding into place with a resounding click, they both pause.

It's the first time they've ever been alone in this room. They've always had Ellie with them, whether she'd been cocooned between them in the bed or sacked out in front of the television or hidden away in her pillow castle, it's never just been them.

The room suddenly seems bigger and his eyes sweep over it for a quick second - from the cushionless sofa and the abandoned afghan in front of the television, to one of Ellie's socks on the floor and the pillow castle still standing strong. The remnants of activity and life that this room has never, ever seen prior to Ellie are scattered everywhere. He looks all around before his eyes land on the bed. The very rumpled, well-used bed with its white sheets and mountain of pillows that are still pushed together, like even in their sleep he and Felicity didn't want to let go.

Felicity shuffles next to him, drawing his attention again. She's idly

playing with a nail on one of her pinkies, chewing on her lip as she stares at the bed as well. Oliver suddenly finds himself very, very aware of his fingers slowly growing numb where he's clutching the picnic basket.

They'd been fine coming up the stairs, their hands tangled together, both of them smiling. Felicity had leaned over to kiss his shoulder, prompting him to pull her close enough to return the favor - on her lips - but she'd shifted at the last second, leading to him giving her a wet kiss on the nose. They'd even been great making their way down the hall, but now… now that they're in the room, the door shut behind them…

It's suddenly more real.

Because it's not just their first date anymore, it's *more*. So, so much more.

Oliver's chest feels very, very full as he chews on the tip of his tongue.

When the silence becomes too much, he opens his mouth to say… *nothing*, because Felicity's grasping his arm, using him for balance as she reaches down to remove her heels. His eyes follow the lines of her body, watching her do the simple task, his jaw snapping shut. It's so easy, so natural, something she does every single day… but not here. She doesn't do that here… until now. In *their* room. Felicity tosses the heels in a haphazard pile next to the door - the casualness in her movements makes his heart flutter; he *loves* how comfortable she is already, treating it like it's her space as well, which it is - before she looks at him.

For reasons he can't even begin to fathom, her being so much shorter, looking up at him through her lashes, the light from the windows emphasizing the bright sheen in her eyes… it sends a sharp surge of need through him and he almost drops the basket, grabbing her right then and there.

He'd just about lost it downstairs. Many times. Many, many times. The reality of touching her of his own volition - knowing he could wrap his arms around her, could kiss her lips, her neck, her shoulders, her hands, her fingers… *anywhere*… it'd hit him harder than he thought it would. It hadn't been until he was alone with her in a dark space, a trail of nerves making her tremble against him, that he'd realized just how wholly she affects him.

She takes over *everything*. It isn't even a question anymore, she just

does. He'd thought it'd been bad before, when he couldn't have her? Oh no, it had been so much worse knowing he *could* and telling himself, *'Not yet.'* It'd taken far more self-control than he thought he'd possessed to reel it in, but he had stopped, the need to make it more meaningful - more *special* - taking precedence.

That is until they'd inadvertently tripped into their separate pasts, which had only made that single moment so much more powerful.

He'd been right on the brink, Felicity's words rattling through his head…

"*I don't care where we are. I don't need a bed, Oliver, you are enough… wherever we are, you are so, so more than enough."*

He'd been so close…

"*Anything with you is perfect. Anything."*

Her words themselves were more effective than any aphrodisiac in the world, and he'd almost given in… until he'd pushed his hand between her thighs.

It was like part of him had faded into the background, everything instantly becoming about *her*.

That still blows his mind - he'd damn near ripped a hole in the front of his pants with how hard he was, how eager and ready and *excited* he had been - but when he'd heard her desperate gasp, felt her nails digging into him, urging him closer, the pleasure he was giving her reflecting back at him, that had all disappeared, and it'd only been about *her*. He'd thought for sure when he pushed it that far, when he touched her like that, that he would fall apart right along with her, but he hadn't. Oliver had never felt anything like that before, that driving need to *please*. He'd always thought he was generous in bed, never taking without giving, but downstairs, swimming in the knowledge that she was flying apart because of him… it'd been *powerful*.

Addicting.

What they'd shared in the gym had been different, totally fueled by a wild desperate emotion, more about finding that release and breaking the tension that'd been living between them for so long, the tension that had only grown after learning about Ellie, after Slade's attack, after the news broke with the supposed scandal of his secret family…

The wine cellar had been pure intent, and he wants to do it again, and again, and again…

Oliver forces himself to swallow, need making him harden, pushing painfully against the seam of his slacks - a sudden urgent reminder that he hadn't reached any release whatsoever, in spite of the tremendous enjoyment he'd taken in pleasing her.

He bites the tip of his tongue just enough to hurt, forcing himself back to the moment right before his brain veers wildly off course - he suddenly remembers with perfect clarity licking his finger in the kitchen to grab some napkins, instantly smelling traces of her arousal all over his hand.

God, to feel her without anything between them… she'd been so wet, soaking through her panties, his fingers gliding against her so effortlessly, pushing her higher and higher…

It suddenly occurs to him that Felicity had said something.

He blinks. "Sorry, what?"

Felicity's eyebrows tick up slightly, her lips tightening like she's fighting a smile. "I'm gonna go freshen up."

"Uh… right. Okay," Oliver replies, nodding dumbly. "Yeah."

And then she does smile, a slow one that pulls at her lips before she disappears into the bathroom. As that door softly clicks into place, Oliver finds himself staring after her… for who the *hell* knows how long until he finally shakes himself out of it.

Freshen up.

This is really happening.

Their date. Their last first date ever.

And then…

Something burns low in his stomach, his eyes flying back to the bed before he forces himself to *move*. To do anything but stand there like a total jackass. Oliver toes his shoes off, going out of his way to make sure they're placed by Felicity's - the domesticity of it pulls at his heart - before he quickly scans the room again, looking for the perfect spot…

There.

Right in front of one of the large picture windows. Their room faces the east, the sun already nestled on the other side of the sky, beating its heavy rays against the opposite end of the house, leaving plenty of light without the stifling heat and providing a sprawling view that includes Starling City in the distance.

Oliver makes his way around the sofa, careful to leave the pillow castle untouched - he knows, without a single doubt, that Ellie would pick up on it instantly if anything was changed in her little kingdom - and sets the basket down. Even without the sun shining in, the room is still stuffy, a little too hot… or is that just him?

He cracks a window open, letting in a light breeze that fills his lungs… and he realizes at that exact moment that his damn hands are shaking. Because he's *nervous*. About his date. With Felicity.

Their last first date, ever.

He's taking Felicity on her last first date ever - *him*. The sense of rightness, the *pride* he feels at that thought has him smiling, closing his eyes, taking a deep breath, practically *basking*… before he turns back to the room. His ears prick, hearing Felicity in the bathroom, and he moves a little quicker.

Tapping his palms against his thighs as he moves, Oliver grabs the rich red throw he'd snagged from one of the linen closets downstairs and with a flick of his wrist, he spreads it out across the floor, creating their picnic spot. His hands are still shaking, a steady stream of nerves clamoring for attention, but he only holds the blanket tighter. There's a new energy in him, a new nervousness that wasn't there before, but it's nothing that makes his skin crawl with anxiety, nothing that makes him think twice.

No, this is *excitement*, a living, breathing anticipation that's making him feel like his limbs are going to vibrate right off his body.

It feels official now, like the fact that they are deliberately taking time for just them - to go on a date and *undoubtedly* so much more - has given the entire thing a legitimacy that hadn't been there before.

He cannot *wait*.

Oliver unpacks the basket, arranging the items in what he hopes is a semi-aesthetically pleasing way. There hadn't been much to choose

from as far as things that didn't require cooking, but he'd managed to collect some cheeses and meats that Raisa had found for him, along with some fruit and crackers. It's not much, and it does nothing to appease the weird urge he has to cook something for her - anything, really, although he has to wonder how she'd feel knowing the only thing he really knows how to make is a mean grilled cheese - even if according to Ellie he does that very thing for them in the future.

The thought of cooking for his family - providing for them - it settles something primal deep inside him while simultaneously fueling his desire to make this even more perfect.

Oliver opens one of the wine bottles, carefully setting it out by the tall wine glasses, and when he steps back, the entire thing reminds him of a poor-man's wine magazine cover. Which, oddly enough, only makes it more perfect. Because it's *them* and he knows with absolute certainty that this is all they need. Some part of him wants to go through all the bells and whistles, wants to take her out, *treat* her, but that's not for right now. One, the idea of leaving Ellie somewhere in the house was still something he was struggling with, so actually leaving her to go somewhere? Hell. No. And two, things have moved so fast, and so much has happened, it'd be a distraction, going somewhere right now, a distraction they don't need because they've already skipped more than a few steps.

No, all he needs is somewhere quiet and safe with the beautiful woman who completes him in ways he didn't even know he needed, who looks at him like he can save the entire world and makes him believe it.

Oliver smiles as he continues setting up. She's always done that, looked at him with such steadfast belief, a surety in her eyes that's unwavering. Felicity has never once hesitated in her faith in him, no matter what. In fact, even at his weakest, even when he feels broken and unworthy, her conviction only grows stronger. But now… now he's not shying away from it. He knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that one day he reaches a point where he *can* have the kind of life he'd never thought he'd get, that he *does* have it, a future of happiness, a *family* - Felicity, a daughter… an unborn son.

It makes him feel like he's a hundred feet tall, because of Felicity… and because of Ellie, because their future selves send her back *here*, to this time…

The memory is a stark reminder of why and how they are where they

are, of the unsettling fact that they have no idea how long this will last, when Zoom will attack next, what's happening in the future, if their actions are changing things, if…

Oliver stops himself, clenching his jaw.

Sara's words ring through his head from earlier, when she'd found him and Raisa in the kitchen after doing a quick trek through the house. After asking why they were back so fast - and after making a cute comment about his stamina which had had him both glaring and blushing because Raisa had been *right there* - he'd responded with, "*Just checking on Ellie."* Sara had paused, staring at him before sighing.

"*Oliver, you know better than anyone how quickly things can change. We both do. So cherish it. Cherish her. Because when those things do change - and they will - it's these moments that you'll remember. You can't live your life worried about the what-if's, especially with a kid.*

"*You're getting a moment, Ollie. So take it."*

Once everything's settled, Oliver stands, leaving the candles he'd stashed in the basket alone - there's ambiance and then there's being ridiculous. It's not like he can set the mood with the sunlight making everything already glow around them.

That's for later.

Later.

And just like that, excitement washes through him again. He can't wait for all the *laters* they have in their future.

Oliver surveys the spread, wiping his hands on his slacks. He glances down at himself - he should change.

He moves to the closet, dodging items in the room as he tugs his dress shirt off, quickly followed by his undershirt, when Felicity opens the bathroom door.

She stops dead in her tracks, her mouth forming a little 'o' as her eyes dart down, soaking in the sight of him shirtless. He feels her gaze like she's right next to him, *touching* him, and he wonders if she feels the same because a light flush colors her cheeks all over again as he lets his shirts fall to the ground. She looks softer than a minute ago, her skin more pink, and he finds himself wondering if she'd washed her face. He can't tell if it's the light in the room or what, but she's *glowing*.

He's almost positive it's just her.

She's beautiful.

"Hi," she breathes, licking her lips. Her eyes are still on his chest, and they stay there for a long moment before she meets his gaze again. And then a deep blush covers her neck and chest as she abruptly shakes her head, her mouth moving without sound, like she's just realized that she's stood there for a solid minute doing nothing but staring at him. He smiles as she waves at the closet. "I was going to change. Into something else. Date-y. Something date-y."

"Me too."

Neither of them move. It strikes him that this is probably ridiculous, considering what they'd just done, but still… there's a new buzz between them, a new awareness that wasn't there before.

She feels it too.

Felicity takes a slow breath, pressing her lips into a gentle line, her eyes on him… and then she bites her bottom lip. It draws his eyes like a moth to a flame. The air thickens, making it hard to breathe, his lungs tightening as he stares at her mouth, remembering very, very well how she tastes… the way she draws his name out, her mouth parted in a little pant, her lips red and swollen… how she gasps when his stubble touches her… and what those little noises she makes sound like when they're muffled by his lips as he cups her face, holding her.

His hands actually ache to touch her again, to feel her smooth skin warming under his touch.

As Felicity's breath stutters - it's her turn to feel his gaze like it's his touch - his eyes drop, following the long line of her neck, which is perfectly bare, her hair still up. He wants to discover which parts make her melt, which areas he can lick and suck, learn the things she likes, determine what makes her cry out the loudest.

Her breath starts coming quicker, as if she can read his thoughts on his face - and maybe she can; his intent is so heavy he feels like he's already touching her. The quick movements have her breasts moving inside her dress… it's not just her neck he hasn't really explored yet, it's there too. He's barely felt the beginnings of how responsive she is, how hard her nipples can get. What would she do if he sucked one into his mouth? If his fingers found her other one…

Oliver aches to touch her again.

Felicity swallows hard and his eyes fly back up to watch the movement - who knew something so simple could be so insanely erotic?

She whispers his name, not moving from her spot as her hands slowly come up. She presses them to her stomach and he stops breathing.

This isn't… no, this isn't how he wants it to go, not like this, not so fast. He wants to take his time, he wants to *woo* her and… and… If they aren't careful, things aren't going to go anywhere near as slow as he wants them to… and the problem with that is that he *doesn't care*. Because they're here, in their space, in what has become home to both of them, and it makes him feel so safe and secure, like nothing bad can touch them here, not as long as they have each other.

Her cheeks grow pinker, her eyes brightening even more - she's stunning, just as affected as he is, and that is the best feeling in the entire world. This is the moment, a moment for just them, and they aren't about to waste a single second more than they already have.

"Oliver," she breathes. The tension growing between them electrifies the air, dancing along the surface of his skin, making his nerves feel like they're burning. "Can you…"

Felicity turns, looking back at him over her shoulder.

Oh.

"Yeah," he says, the word barely audible, his eyes falling to her zipper.

The idea of undressing her is overwhelming and he thinks he's about to stand there and do nothing, but his body has other ideas. He's moving, closing the distance without having to tell himself to, and he doesn't stop until he's practically flush against her.

Oliver touches her shoulders - she's so warm, responsive, her body moving to meet his, and god, she smells good. Fresh, like she did clean up a bit, and he catches a hint of the perfume she'd used that morning, the coconut shampoo from her shower.

Felicity dips her head forward, her hand snaking up to pull her ponytail out, and he watches her every move, transfixed when her hair falls in soft, gentle waves. He breathes her in as she pulls her hair over her shoulder, giving him access.

He leans closer, his fingers finding the zipper.

Oliver pulls it all the way down, not stopping until he reaches its end, right over the generous roundness of her backside. His eyes linger, and before he can stop himself, he pushes his hand inside her dress, flush against her naked lower back.

"Aah," Felicity gasps, arching as he touches the incredibly sensitive skin. Goosebumps erupt across her skin as she sways closer to him and he watches, fascinated, as they travel up her spine, spreading over the expanse of her back.

She's not wearing a bra.

That realization has desire slamming into him and when he exhales sharply, she feels it. She shivers.

Oliver absently thinks this is the time, this is when he asks if she wants to change, if she wants to continue with their date, if this is too much or too fast, but he doesn't do any of those things. Because he's *finally* touching her, with the pure, single intent of oh-so-much more, and god, he doesn't want to stop, not for anything.

And yet…

"Felicity…" That single utterance of her name is laced with everything he can't say, because he's afraid if he does…

She nods with a quiet, "Don't stop," that has his heart climbing up his throat.

That's all he needs.

Oliver slowly moves his hand up her back, following her spine. He watches the progression of his fingers, taking his time, not feeling anything but the way her muscles jump under his touch, the way she shivers and twitches, her neck tightening in response to the sensations he's giving her.

When he reaches her shoulder blades, Oliver slips both hands inside her dress, pressing them firmly against her skin. Felicity gasps, her back arching to get closer to him. He watches, captivated. The way her spine curves, how her shoulders press together… it draws him in like nothing else ever has. He doesn't stop. He keeps moving, pushing his hands out, taking the fabric of her dress with him as his hands travel across her upper back, removing her dress as he goes. Oliver

pushes the material down her arms… and then his eyes catch sight of her right shoulder.

His fingers falter.

Felicity takes over. She shimmies slightly, the material falling to her waist where she wiggles her hips to remove it all the way…

But he only has eyes for one thing.

Her scar.

From the bullet she'd taken for Sara.

His stomach suddenly burns at the memory - it could have been so much worse, and he knows that, but still, the idea of her *taking a bullet* rips through him. Oliver runs his fingers over her maligned skin so reverently that he barely feels it the first time. So he does it again. And again. It's bigger than he'd thought, and it's still pink, still healing. She was shot months ago, but it still looks fresh, like it might still hurt if he pressed on it.

As her dress pools at her feet, revealing nothing else but tasteful lace panties and endless expanses of skin, Oliver grasps her shoulders and presses a soft kiss to the spot.

Felicity sighs, turning her head to face him, her hands coming up to cover his. He keeps his lips pressed to her for a long moment, relishing the life pulsating in her, the very evident fact that she's still here - with him - despite her wound. Without warning, Oliver moves, keeping his lips pressed to her in a series of gentle kisses that he lays up the nape of her neck before wrapping his arms around her. He nuzzles his face into her throat, cradling her in his arms, reveling in her warmth.

He closes his eyes, breathing her in.

He'd almost lost her before he really even had her. The thought burns a hole in his chest, so white hot that it takes his breath away. Last week, that would have made him want to run, to push her away, but now he only wants to hold her tighter. He can't lose her, and he *won't.* If he has to fight a hundred soldiers like Zoom, like Slade… hell, even like Isabel, he will.

Felicity wraps her arms around his, holding him close. "I love you."

"I love you," he replies, his voice muffled against her skin. He tightens his grip. "God, I love you."

"You know," she whispers, and he opens his eyes when he hears the smile in her voice. "You can just call me Felicity."

It takes a second, but the words do exactly what she means for them to do.

Oliver chuckles, shaking his head, whispering, "Hilarious," which has her grinning… and before she can say or do anything else, he pushes his face into her neck, making her yelp.

With a startled giggle, Felicity tries to dodge away from him and the tickle of his scruff against her hypersensitive skin, but he doesn't let her get far. He grips her tighter, pushing his face in, eliciting the laughter that makes him soar.

Her hand flies to the back of his head, gripping a fistful of hair, trying to pull him back, but he's not going anywhere. Not ever.

"Oliver…" Felicity giggles, her voice breathlessly desperate. "Please… stop… please!"

"Okay, okay," he says, finally stopping, leaving her breathing heavy, her chest heaving…

And as if someone has flipped a switch, Oliver's suddenly viciously aware of how very hot her skin is under his touch. She's flushed, her breasts brushing against his bare arm with each gasp for air… and her hand is still in his hair, gripping tightly as she leans back into him, every inch of her pressed against him…

She feels so damn *good*.

"Felicity…"

Oliver wraps himself around her, finally letting himself look.

She's absolutely stunning. He stares at her, taking her in - her soft breasts, her dusky nipples, the beautiful dark pink a sharp contrast to her creamy skin. They're already hard, aching to be touched, to be licked. He catalogues every little thing, practically memorizing her as his eyes move down, to her panties, to her long, toned legs. He wants to kiss and lick and savor every inch of her.

He presses one hand against her softly rounded stomach, delighting in the way she trembles as his other brushes down over her hip. His finger slip over the band of her panties, and they itch to dip inside.

Oliver holds her tight. "You are so beautiful."

Her breath catches, her head bowing bashfully. He moves the hand on her stomach up, his fingertips brushing the underside of her breast. Her breathing grows heavier, both of them watching, savoring the feel of the skin-to-skin contact. Her heart's pounding just as fast as his is.

Oliver's thumb slips up the gentle curve and brushes over her nipple.

With a ragged moan, Felicity covers his hand and pushes it all the way up until the soft flesh of her breast is pressed firmly into his palm.

"Oh… god," she whispers. He honestly has no idea which of them is taking the stilted breaths or who's breathing faster. Her hand's still on his as he squeezes her gently and her back bows, pressing her lush ass right into his painfully hard dick.

Oliver lets out a choked hiss, pulling her closer, and Felicity rolls her hips back into his, making him jerk against her. She whispers his name, her voice so full of need that it has him positively throbbing for her… and the hand that still lingers on her hip shifts closer to her center. He grazes the front of her panties, barely, but he can still feel how wet they are, making his need for her spike. She's shaking, her body tightening with anticipation, and they stay just like that, almost suspended in time… if it lasts an eternity or five seconds, Oliver's not sure.

He presses his hand *closer*, but it's not close enough. Felicity's other hand suddenly shoots down, covering his as she spreads her legs. She pushes him right against her sex, his fingers slipping through the wet material, just like downstairs, except this… this is so much *more*. So much better.

She's nodding rapidly, gasping, "Yes… please…" and that's all he needs.

Oliver pulls his hand away from hers just enough to shove his fingers underneath the band of her panties. He cups her sex, his eyes slamming shut, moaning her name when he feels how hot she is.

"*Oliver*."

A guttural groan sounds from deep in her chest and she grabs his wrist, holding on as he explores. God, she's soaking wet, and it feels *amazing* as he spreads her juices, touching her everywhere from her entrance to right above her tender clit. Oliver fights the urge to yank her closer, forcing himself to remain still as her hips rotate against his hand, her body jerking beautifully each time his fingers graze her sensitive little bud. His pants are too damn tight, and with each brush of her ass against him, he feels his control slipping more and more… but at the same time, he could do this forever.

Felicity's whimpers fill the air as he concentrates on her clit. Her breaths come out in uneven pants, her skin growing hotter, a dark flush spreading across her chest as he rubs. She's whispering his name under her breath, over and over, and he wants more, he wants it *louder*.

Oliver's hand speeds up, earning him a low keen. His grip on her breast tightens when he feels her legs give out slightly at the increased pressure.

He can't believe how much he wants to feel her come again, it's like a drug - the sounds she makes, the complete and total loss of control, the pure pleasure evident in every line of her body...

"Oh... oh god," she whimpers. "*Yes*..."

Oliver presses his face against hers until he finds her ear. He sucks her lobe between his lips, making her jerk with a violent shiver that has her nipples hardening even more. Her soft cries grow louder with increasing urgency, her muscles quivering… and then her hips suddenly still, her mouth falling open in soundless cry as she hits that gorgeous little peak right before…

She comes with a loud shout, her back bowing as pleasure floods her veins, her juices soaking his fingers. Her legs give out and Oliver tightens his arm around her, keeping her flush against him, holding her up, reveling in the aftershocks rocking through her.

"You're so amazing, Felicity," he whispers, barely feeling his own need as he flies with her, absently thinking he could watch her come like that forever.

It's barely a couple of seconds before she finds her feet again, her hands gripping him tightly, her chest rising and falling with breaths so rapid he wonders if she's actually getting oxygen.

He pulls his hand out of her panties, spreading his wet fingers over her lower stomach as she comes down. He kisses her ear, her temple, her jaw, her heart rate finally starting to slow, her breaths growing more even.

She sighs, shifting, like her skin feels different all of a sudden… shifting right against him.

Like his hand has a life of its own, he pulls her in, his hips surging forward, and just like that, his need for her comes back with vicious fervor.

Oliver digs his face into her neck, pulling her even closer with a harsh, "*Felicity*."

She spins in his arms, a rasped, "Oliver," on her lips before she's pushing herself up onto her toes, cupping his face to pull him down to her level…

The kiss is *searing*, drawing a delicate whimper out of him as he wraps himself around her. Her naked breasts press into his chest and he groans, hauling her closer, his hands sprawling across the width of her back. And then one slips down, right over her backside - Oliver grips her ass tight, earning him a long, low whine, and he only wants more. He kisses her harder. She's never close enough, not ever, and he wants so much *more*. He *needs* more… and he can have it. They both can.

Felicity pushes herself flush against him, her lower stomach pressing right against his straining erection, making Oliver moan, deep in his chest. He thrusts his hips against her mindlessly, seeking that delicious friction. Slipping a hand up to the back of her neck, he angles her head, deepening the kiss, nearly ravaging her all over again in his haste to touch her, to feel her.

It's a culmination of the last two days, of the emotional journeys they've both taken, separately and together. It's the quiet moments and the ones that damn near screamed their intensity, only pushing them closer, deepening the bond they'd already shared. It's *tangible*, this thing between them, and it runs so deep into his foundations that Oliver can't believe he never let himself give in before, never let himself go like this... But he couldn't, not with anyone else. Only with her, only with his Felicity. She makes him so much better, she adds so much, and it's the fact that she demands the same in return that has him melting before her, giving her everything he is.

He *wants* to give her everything, he wants her to have it all, to take it

all, to share it with him, and that's something he's never felt before.

Oliver knows it should be terrifying, because he's always run from anything like this. *Always*… but not with her. Never with her. With her he's just Oliver - he's himself in a way he never has been before, and it's the most effortless feeling in the entire world.

To think he'd once believed he couldn't have this, that he couldn't be with her.

He wants to bury himself as deep as he possibly can inside her. He wants her to see the changes she's inspired in him, what she's done for him, and what he wants to do for her, in every way possible. She makes him so much stronger in ways he'd never imagined, ways he wants to show her, ways he wants to *thank* her for…

God, he wants to *worship* her.

With a ragged gasp, Oliver pulls back. Their gazes lock, and not breaking eye contact, not once, he leans down. His chest brushes over her breasts, her nipples, and he knows each and every time one of his scars touches her because she jerks, her pupils blowing wide. It'll only be later when he thinks back to this moment that he realizes for the first time ever he doesn't feel the burden behind all the marks his five years away left him with.

His hands slide down over her hips, down her naked thighs, and she gives him a series of beautiful, breathlessly needy sounds. Her eyelids slip shut for a second at the sensation and he wants to spend an entire damn day doing just *that*… but that's for later, because right now she's so warm, so smooth; she feels so good under his calloused touch, a softness he'd never have let himself have a few short days ago.

Oliver's fingers ghost over her skin, moving back up, over the thin lace of her panties, and then he wraps one arm around her waist while his other hand grips her thigh, picking her up in one smooth motion.

Felicity gasps, grabbing his shoulders for balance. He cradles her close, holding her like she weighs nothing, and she might as well. She's light as a feather in his arms, because she makes him feel just as light. He could carry her for miles, even though he knows she wouldn't let him, knows she'd rather do it herself. But the fact that he *can*… it satisfies something deep inside him, something he hadn't realized had been starved until he's turning with her in his arms, making his way to the bed.

To *their* bed.

A thrill of that damn nervous excitement shoots through him again and he grips her tighter. He can feel the heat emanating from between her legs and he moves faster, digging his fingers into her as she wraps an arm around his neck, her other hand cupping his cheek, turning his face up to hers.

Her kiss is soft, gentle… *loving*, a cleansing light that washes through him.

Before he knows it, his knees hit the bed. Oliver turns, his lips never leaving hers, sitting down and pulling her to straddle his lap. His inner core strains slightly, long enough to remind him that he's absolutely doing things he has no business doing considering all the trauma his body has been through lately, but he absolutely does not care. Just as quickly as the punishment of his body starts, it's gone. And it fades to a distant memory when she sinks down, pressing herself against him, right where he needs her.

Oliver's hands fly to her hips, tugging her down even further.

"*Yes*…"

Felicity rotates her hips, her head falling back. Oliver takes complete advantage, winding his arms around her, pulling her closer to press a series of soft, wet kisses over her chest… and down, down to one of her nipples. They're already hardening again, even though she just came, and he *has* to taste her.

"Oh god… Oliver!" she cries, her back arching.

They're so *sensitive*.

He sucks her nipple into his mouth, rolling his tongue around it. Her hips move with more urgency, her body curling around his, her face pressing into his hair. The rush of exhale that skates down his neck is scaldingly hot, her fingers grip him tightly… she tastes so, *so* good. She shudders, pushing him closer, her hips moving with even more alacrity.

When she comes down with one particularly hard thrust, her teeth digging into her lip so hard she might as well draw blood, she starts to shake, her body growing hotter, and it sends him into overdrive. With a bone-deep shudder, Oliver releases her breast and turns his face up to hers, his hand flying to the back of her head to pull her face back to

his.

They crash together again as Oliver wraps his arm around her waist, lifting her up. She winds her legs around him, keeping herself close as he spins, dropping her onto the bedspread. Felicity instantly spreads her legs, just like she did the night before, and he sinks down against her.

She's so *hot* and she feels so good…

"God, Felicity," Oliver groans, pressing his hips into hers. It's *just* like last night, all over again, and he knows that, he tells himself to stop, but he can't. She feels too good, too damn good, and this time he's feeling more through his pants and her wet panties. Felicity nods rapidly, her hands pulling his face back to hers as he thrusts again, and again, pushing them both higher, and higher… but not yet, not *yet.*

It's moving so fast, too damn fast, and he's afraid if he doesn't put the brakes on, he might not stop, and he wants…

He doesn't even *know*.

No, he wants her. *Now*.

"Me too," she whispers, nodding, like he'd said that out loud. "Now… *now. Please*."

Oliver nods, gasping, "Felicity…" and then, with one last kiss that leaves his head spinning, Oliver pushes himself off her, his hands flying to his pants. He can't look away from her, he doesn't want to - she's absolutely gorgeous, her hair already tangled from his hands, glowing in the sunlight, her skin covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Oliver tugs the pants off, leaving him in nothing but his boxers when a thought hits him, and he freezes, his eyes slamming shut.

God, he hadn't thought of that. It hadn't even *occurred* to him.

Oliver spins to his nightstand, wrenching the drawer open.

"What are you…" Felicity starts, propping herself up to see what he's doing, but he doesn't answer, digging through the contents until he finds the box, tucked away in the far corner. With a small triumphant smile, Oliver pulls it out, shaking it. There's still some in there, he realizes with a rush of gratitude. He vaguely hears Felicity's, "Oliver…" as he checks the date.

They're *expired*.

"Damn it," Oliver breathes. When was the last time he'd had a girl in his room? It was before the island, way before then. *Shit.* "Felicity…"

"*Oliver*." His head snaps back to her as she sits up. Felicity reaches for him, grabbing his arm, pulling him back to her. "I'm covered. We're good."

His heart leaps at that - it positively fucking *leaps* at that - but he still hesitates, because…

"And I trust you," she continues, nodding, wrapping her arm around his wrist, pulling him to her. "I trust you."

"Felicity," Oliver chokes out, shaking his head. He drops the box and it lands with a light thud. "Are you sure? I don't want…"

"I trust you," she whispers again.

That hits him way harder than he could ever have expected. Felicity looks up at him, complete and utter faith filling her eyes. He can't even begin to explain the feeling filling him - her words alone are enough, but the way she's looking at him - her confidence in him, in his ability to keep her safe, in his *desire* to keep her safe… it hits him right in the chest. He will do anything to keep her safe, anything, and that she knows that, that she believes he will…

How did he get so lucky?

Felicity smiles and pulls on him until he's between her legs. She wraps her arms around him, one hand spanning his lower back, right over the burn scar there, the other hooking into his boxers, tugging them down slightly. Oliver forgets how to do anything as he lets her do whatever she wants, and then he absolutely *crashes* when she leans forward, pressing a soft kiss to his stomach. Her lips are so gentle and warm and he shivers, his hands slipping through her hair.

She kisses her way across his abdomen, each one chaste and simple, leaving wet little marks in her path as she slowly… slowly… moves lower.

Oliver's entire body seizes at the thought of what she might be doing and he shakes his head - he won't last, he definitely will not last - before he's stepping back, forcing her to drop her arms. He cups her face, her hair still tangled in his fingers as he leans over, whispering

her name before he kisses her.

It's quick and hard and before he knows it, he's urging her back again and she goes willingly, crawling back until she's in the center of the bed.

Oliver drinks her in greedily, hanging back long enough to remove her panties… and oh god, he wants to taste her, he wants to feel her thighs around his head, her hands in his hair or gripped tightly in his, her back arching as he licks his way up to the tender little bundles of nerves that he'll suck on until she's a quivering mess, until she has nothing left.

He *needs* to.

Oliver hooks his fingers in her panties and tugs them down. Felicity lifts her hips to help him, her eyes never leaving his as he drops them on the floor before shoving his boxers down. She opens her arms for him, fully expecting him to crawl back on top of her, her legs spreading, creating the perfect cradle for his hips.

But he has to taste her. It's an actual need surging through him as he stares down at her, his need to sink into her agonizingly painful, but not yet.

"Oliver..."

He crawls back onto the bed, and the most beautiful grin covers her lips as she wraps her arms around him - it brightens her entire face with a happiness that takes his breath away. She's still flushed from a moment ago, her lips swollen and used, little beard burns decorating the delicate skin around her mouth, and Oliver can't not kiss her. It's impossible, he's finding; he'll never get enough of her kisses, not ever.

This one is soft, loving, and it leaves him feeling completely cherished as she opens herself for him. That feeling surges through him, filling him with a light that's blinding... all because of her.

Oliver kisses her once more, twice... and then he kisses her jaw, making his way down her throat. He nips and sucks, taking his time, slowly building her back up again. Her fingers sift through his hair, her nails scraping against his scalp, making him shiver as she hits spots he didn't know were so sensitive until she touches them. He drags his tongue over her collarbone... and then he goes lower.

His lips and tongue dance over her chest, over her breasts. Oliver

sucks her nipple back into his mouth. She whispers his name in a string of incoherent sounds, her grip in his hair suddenly tightening to the point of pain. He swirls his tongue around the hardening bead, slowly slipping a hand down her side, drawing his fingers down her ribs, down to her hip, to her thigh.

"Oliver," Felicity pants, shivering. He glances up, her nipple between his teeth to see her lips trembling, her eyes barely open enough to keep watching him. The second their gazes meet, she tugs on his hair, trying to pull him back up. "Please... I need you."

He swipes his tongue over her nipple, eliciting a whimper before he releases her.

"Felicity," he starts, kissing his way to her other breast. "Do you remember what I said downstairs?"

"Hmm?" she manages, want lacing that little noise, furrowing her brow.

Oliver drags his stubble over her breast, something she definitely likes as she lets out a startled cry, pushing herself closer, but it's nothing compared to the sound she makes when he drags his chin right over her hard nipple.

"I told you," he continues, moving lower, littering wet kisses down her stomach, "that I wanted to take my time..." He pauses at her hip bone, sucking on the sensitive skin there before making his way back up over the slope of her stomach, whispering, "That I wanted to taste you, Felicity."

"Oh my god," Felicity whines, shaking her head. "Oliver, you just..." Her words die out though, her body speaking louder than anything she could say. Her hips surge up, her hot naked core rubbing right against his chest. "Oh god."

Oliver smiles, moving down until he reaches the juncture between her thighs. She's a panting, writhing mess, her fists curled up in the sheets, her eyes locked on him as he slips off the bed, getting on his knees before her.

The move has his dick rubbing right along the goddamn mattress, and he bites back a hiss. He's painfully hard, to the point where any movement makes him forget how to breathe, but when he concentrates on her, when he thinks about finally knowing her like this, it's easier to push back.

She's delightfully pink and swollen, and *wet*, she's so wet. Felicity lets out a frantic pant as he leans closer, inhaling her scent. His eyes slip back up to find hers on him, her breasts swaying with each breath.

He keeps his eyes on hers as he cups the back of her thighs, spreading her open.

And then Oliver leans in, dragging his tongue up her slit.

Felicity instantly tenses with a sharp, "Ah!" as she undulates under him, pressing herself closer, her hips thrusting up for more.

She's delicious, pure Felicity, and he doesn't waste a second, taking her into his mouth, licking and sucking, tasting more of her.

Her whimpers slowly grow into needy gasps, which morph into low moans of his name as he watches her watch him. It's so much more than anything he could have expected, so much more, and the intensity of her eyes on him amplifies everything to blinding levels. He flattens his tongue, rubbing it right against her clit, and Felicity gasps, her hips rolling up to meet him, her hands flying to his head. She pushes her fingers through his hair, her hands dropping to caress his face, her eyes never leaving his.

Dropping her thighs onto his shoulders, Oliver's hands find hers. Their fingers lace together tightly, holding onto each other, her nails digging into the back of his hands.

Oliver wraps his lips around her clit, relishing the myriad of sensations on her face as they hit her. Her cries grow louder, and they echo through the room. Her heels dig into his back, her thighs tightening around him, her hips starting to move with more urgency.

He sees the moment her next orgasm is cresting - her breasts tightening, her stomach muscles quivering, her thighs shaking. He sucks harder.

Her back bows and she cries out his name, quickly followed by, "Ah… *aah*!" before he tugs her back down, redoubling his efforts.

Felicity suddenly shakes her head rapidly, dropping his hands to grab his face again.

"Oliver, c'mere," she moans desperately. His cock aches at the sound, his hips thrusting up against the bed as she pulls at him. "C'mere, c'mere, I need you, please. I want you inside me when I... *please*."

There's no power on this earth that would have him ignoring that request.

Oliver pulls away from her, wiping his face, something that makes her moan, sitting up slightly to touch him as he crawls back onto the bed. Felicity wraps her arms around his shoulders, pulling him down over her, spreading her legs for him.

She doesn't hesitate to kiss him, tugging his bottom lip into her mouth. She swipes her tongue over it and Oliver's meets her halfway, desire for her nearly ripping his damn body in half at the thought of her tasting herself on his lips.

The need for oxygen quickly becomes too much though, both of them breathing too hard. Oliver sinks into her embrace, sighing as he settles against her like it's the most natural thing in the world, as if this is the one single place he's meant to be forever.

And it is.

That thought has him pausing as it hits him: this is it. This is *home*. He's finally right where he's supposed to be.

With *her*.

He slips through her wetness, making them both gasp. Oliver pulls his hips back, reaching between them to grasp himself. He groans - God, he's so sensitive. His eyes never leave hers as he presses against her, sliding the head of his cock against her slit. Her brow creases with pleasure and she whispers his name, her eyes glazing over as she grasps him tighter.

Oliver finds her entrance, and he slowly presses himself into her. His eyes nearly cross at the silken feel of her inner walls closing in around him, but the sight of her experiencing it right along with him keeps his gazed locked on her.

"Oh…" Felicity gasps, her back arching as he fills her. She digs her nails into his shoulders with one hand, the other slipping into his hair, holding him as he moves, not stopping until he's completely seated inside her. She shudders and, just like before, he finds himself pushing his own needs back as he waits - waits to make sure she's okay, that he can keep going. Felicity wraps her arms around his shoulders, her legs tightening around him, and he takes that as his cue, slowly pulling out, thrusting back in, watching her the entire time. When he pauses again, Felicity shakes her head, pulling him down to her with a

harried, "Don't stop, Oliver, don't stop…" before she kisses him.

And he doesn't, he doesn't stop, not for anything. His next thrust is harder, making her shudder, their combined moans getting lost in their soft kisses.

Oliver pushes his arms up underneath her, wrapping her up, holding her as close as he can as they move together, breathe each other's air, connecting in a way that he's never, ever felt before. This moment... it's integral, *important*, a moment he knows will resonate through the rest of his life.

"I love you," he whispers, over and over, and she whispers it back, her voice slowly becoming more breathless with each thrust. She cups his face, cradling him to her as much as he's cradling her, the words a litany on her lips, "I love you."

Oliver kisses her lips, her cheek, her jaw, following the line down to her throat as their pleasure builds. He takes his time, making love to her, his body starting to shake with the effort. His pace increases, his thrusts gaining more force. He presses his forehead to hers, their lips grazing, their cries mingling as she meets him, each and every single one, rocking against the other. She feels so good, so perfect around him… and he wants to feel her flying apart around him, hear her gorgeous cries and her whimpering his name… Oliver angles his hips, hiking his knee up for more leverage and she lifts her legs, wrapping them around his waist, sending him deeper.

It's perfect. It's everything.

"Oh god," Felicity suddenly whispers, her breathing turning shallow and rapid. She digs her nails in, nodding desperately, her body starting to tremble. And as if they're tied together, his own pleasure suddenly spikes, sending him higher than he's ready for, the white hot burn coiling at the base of his spine, sending heated tingles along his every nerve.

Oliver groans, squeezing his eyes shut, whispering her name.

"Oh god, Oliver… don't stop… Oliver…!"

He doesn't stop, he won't stop… but he's so close…

Felicity's cries grow louder, her body tightening, but it's not enough. Oliver blindly yanks one hand out from under her and pushes it between them, lifting his hips just enough to find her clit. His muscles

burn from the effort but he barely feels it as his fingers slide over her slick little pearl, making her cry out so loud it echoes. Oliver rubs her, urgently, the little bud swelling under his touch as his hips start to lose all rhythm.

"Oh... god, Felicity…" Oliver grits his teeth, burying his face in her neck, concentrating on her, holding her as tightly as he can as they move against each other. His cries grow louder, and hers echo in his ear, her grip on him growing tighter and tighter until…

Felicity comes with a sharp cry just as his own pleasure explodes. Oliver falls over the edge with a heavy shout, thrusting into her one last time, his back bowing as he spills into her. He keeps moving, his moans muffled against her shoulder, riding out the bliss, pushing her even higher until he has nothing left, and they collapse into each other.

Silence.

Felicity strokes the back of his neck, her nails drifting through the damp hair there.

Oliver nuzzles her neck, dropping feather-light kisses everywhere he can reach.

When his weight becomes too much, he pulls out of her, despite her protests - "*No, don't move… I like it...*" - and drops onto the mattress next to her.

Felicity turns into him, meeting him halfway. They wrap their arms around each other, cuddling closer.

I love you.

They make love one more time before finally getting up, but it's only to migrate to the picnic he'd set up. They eat together, talking, relaxing, drinking wine, wrapped together in a sheet off the bed despite the lingering warmth from the day. As the sun slowly sinks, they sit together, Felicity between Oliver's legs, her back resting against his chest. His fingers drift over her arm, and she draws lazy circles on his naked thigh.

When Oliver sees what time it is, he suggests they go downstairs for dinner with Ellie, to which she wholeheartedly agrees.

They take a quick shower - *together*, even though Felicity tells him

there won't be any getting clean in there. He whispers, "Oh yes there will be," before tugging her in with him.

Ellie's delighted giggles meet them at the base of the stairs and with a sharp, "Momma!" she launches herself into Felicity's arms.

After greeting Oliver with a, "Hi, Daddy!" she asks, "Did you guys go on a mission?" Felicity lets out a not-so-subtle cough at that, but before Oliver can answer - what the hell he thought he was going to say is beyond him - Ellie interrupts with, "Ellie kiss! Ellie kiss!"

With a chuckle, Oliver wraps his arms around his girls, pulling them into his chest, all three of them getting in a kiss before Ellie launches into a very detailed story about how she spent her afternoon, including *finally* getting Uncle Diggle to have a tea party with her and her fairies.

Felicity didn't think it was possible to see John Diggle blush as much as he does when he hears Ellie repeating the story, and she didn't think *she* could blush as much when Sara sends her a knowing wink while Diggle makes a comment about the length of time they were gone, which makes Oliver huff and roll his eyes.

They eat dinner together, the entire family - Oliver, Felicity, Ellie, Diggle, Lyla, Sara, Moira and Donna - Felicity squirming only slightly at the too-insightful twin gazes of their mothers. It doesn't bother him in the least though. He only laughs when Sara makes a suggestive comment and Felicity turns a gorgeous shade of red as her mother raises an eyebrow at him. He covers the mild discomfort of that look on his mother's face with a sip of wine, but he can't really be bothered about this. Not when everything is so amazing. Not when he's basking in how incredibly perfect his life is for the first time *ever*.

Later, when they go upstairs, both of them still floating on a cloud, Felicity announces bathtime for Ellie. Their daughter grabs a giant yellow rubber ducky that Moira had included with the items that'd been in their room that morning - *this* ducky's name is Sir Waddlesworth the Fourth, and he's just like one she has at *their* home, whose name is Sir Waddlesworth the Third. What happened to Sir Waddlesworth the First and Second, Ellie doesn't say. The girls file into the bathroom, Felicity blowing Oliver a kiss before closing the door. A second later, Ellie opens it and blows him a kiss as well.

When Oliver hears a giant splash and Felicity's shocked cry, he runs over to check on them only to find Felicity completely covered in

water - *outside* the tub - and Ellie giggling like mad inside where there's significantly less water now, Sir Waddlesworth the Fourth clutched in her arms.

As Oliver starts laughing, much to Felicity's chagrin, a huge grin splits Ellie's face as she says, "I told you he makes a big splash, Momma!"

"You think this is funny?" Felicity asks Oliver, raising her eyebrows at him. He can't answer, still chuckling, which is when she strikes. Felicity launches herself forward, grabbing his wrist and tugging him closer, yelling, "Get Sir Waddlesworth, Ellie-bug!"

They effectively splash Oliver with so much water that all three of them are soaking wet by the time bath time over. So is the floor, but it's only soapy water and that's a small price to pay for the ringing sound of his girls' laughter that echoes in his ears.

As Oliver and Felicity dry off in the closet, she makes another comment apologizing to her future-self because not only will their child curse in the classroom, she'll be an unruly bath-taker. It makes Oliver laugh again, and he pulls her into his arms, kissing her until they're both breathless. As they part, they have every intention of that being the end of it… but it's not, not at all. Kissing her, he's quickly finding out, is like throwing gasoline on a fire - it escalates *quickly*, with Felicity practically climbing him like a tree, pushing him into a wall of hanging clothing…

That is, until Ellie swings the door open, asking them what's taking so long.

When it's time for bedtime, Ellie crawls into the pillow castle, making her parents go in with her. She grabs a book - Oliver makes a mental note to thank his mother, she truly thought of everything - and hands it to Felicity.

"The story about the purple bee, Momma."

Felicity lays back against the makeshift bed Ellie had put together.

Ellie crawls under her left arm and Oliver claims her right side. They both pillow their heads on her shoulders, something that makes Felicity grin so broadly that joy practically radiates off of her.

Oliver holds one side of the book while Felicity reaches around Ellie to hold the other.

Ellie's asleep by the tenth page and after reading a few more for good measure, Felicity closes the book, pressing a soft kiss to her daughter's forehead before doing the same to Oliver's, whose eyes are growing heavy with sleep. She cuddles her family closer, closing her eyes for a second, whispering to herself they'll just stay a few more minutes…

They all fall asleep, right there.

When Oliver wakes in the morning, he has to blink a few times, taking a second to realize they'd slept the whole night in the pillow castle… and that the noises that'd woken him are coming from Felicity and Ellie. They're still lying tucked under the afghan - the very same one that's barely covering him now, the bed hogs. They're facing each other, whispering softly, lost in conversation.

Oliver gives an exaggerated yawn to alert them to his being awake, but they barely pull away from each other, save for Ellie's head popping up for a second to say, "Go back to sleep, Daddy, we're talking." Oliver raises his eyebrows at that as Felicity snorts with quiet laughter, turning onto her back to look at him.

"Good morning," she whispers. The smile on her face is *content*, so content, and he takes a second to marvel. To know that he's part of the reason why it's there makes him feel like he's flying. He leans over, cupping her jaw, whispering, "Morning," before he kisses her.

It's the perfect morning, waking up with his two girls, everything that's *right* - at least for the time being.

He never wants it to end, this *peace*. This *joy*.

And it doesn't… for approximately twelve and a half days.

Chapter 21

The dozen days that follow aren't calm, exactly. They can't be. Definitely not in the last gasps of a mayoral election when your mother's in a hotly contested race to lead the city. But they also aren't what Oliver might have expected at all.

There's been no sign of Zoom, no terrifying *rip* as time fractures right in front of them. Isabel's been conspicuously silent and Blood's only volleys have come in the form of personally affronted denials of any wrongdoing in front of every camera he can find. So, in the absence of any sort of attack, they've fallen into a comfortable routine.

Someone is always with Ellie. Usually that someone is him and Felicity, but when it's not, it's Digg and Lyla or Sara and hired security. They're never at ease, really, but the sense of impending danger lessens as time passes and Oliver finds himself enjoying the role of Ellie's father on a daily basis more than he'd have thought possible.

The bond he has with Ellie grows stronger with each passing day. He didn't think it was possible to love her any more than he already did, but every single minute with his daughter has him falling deeper and deeper. Every day is a discovery and the more he learns, the more amazed he is that he had any part in her creation. She's *perfect.* And Felicity… He's loved her for months now, but seeing her in the role of his child's mother gives him an entirely new aspect to fall for. He finds himself stopping and just watching them together on a daily basis, in awe that this is *his*, that he has this family. Not just in the future, but *now*.

It's strange, the way they're simultaneously living their relationship in its infancy stages while playing the roles they'll have seven years down the road. The few times he and Felicity pause to question the what-if's and the why-not's, they usually get interrupted by Ellie; but those thoughts are never far from his mind. Still, he wouldn't trade any of it for the world… even though it means he and Felicity don't get quite as much time for just the two of them. They steal tiny moments here and there, but most of their days are spent with Ellie. And it's *fantastic*. He loves it. He wakes up every morning with Felicity and Ellie in his arms, *hopeful* and *happy*, and he goes to bed every night with whispered conversations, their daughter asleep safe and sound between them.

He hadn't known life could be like this - at least, not *his* life.

The soft shuffle of bare feet on the carpet draws his attention and it's quickly followed by a soft, "Hey you."

Oliver shifts where he's still in bed, Ellie sleeping in the crook of his arm, and opens his eyes.

Felicity pauses where she's standing in the doorway to the bathroom. Her hair is a wild mess, framing her beautiful face, all of it falling to the side when she tilts her head. She's wearing nothing but his shirt and a pair of sleep shorts so tiny he can't see them beneath the hem. He stops breathing at the sight. Sunlight filters through the window, catching her hair, bathing her in early morning yellowed light that makes the skin of her long legs positively *glow*. He can't stop staring, and he doesn't even try to stop. He doesn't want to.

"Oliver," she says with a laugh when he doesn't return her greeting. "What-"

"*God*, you're beautiful," he whispers.

Felicity blushes - she *always* blushes when he makes comments like that, it never fails. It turns her cheeks rosy and rushes down her neck, making her flush, which is so damn sexy he often has to stop himself from touching her. She bites her bottom lip, ducking her head.

"I haven't even brushed my hair yet," she protests, running her hair through her wild tresses. "And I saw it in the mirror, so I know what this mess looks like."

"Trust me," Oliver says. "You are *gorgeous*." He slips out of bed, careful not to jostle Ellie too much and risk waking her. The toddler's breathing barely changes. Oliver closes the space between them, not missing the way Felicity's eyes darken with anticipation. He slides his hands under the shirt to settle on her hips - the shorts are *low* and he slips his fingers under the hem as he tugs her closer. "Hi."

"Hi," she replies with a little smile. She drapes her arms around his neck as he leans down to nuzzle against her cheek. He's surrounded by her and it's like being engulfed in happiness itself. The frizz of her hair clouds his vision and the remnant scent of her coconut shampoo and his soap on her warm skin fills his senses.

"I want to drag you back to bed," he says, pressing his lips to the curve of her jaw. He relishes the way she shivers and sucks in a breath.

It's not an option right now, not with Ellie fast asleep in bed. But his body doesn't seem the least bit aware of that fact. He positively aches for her. Every fiber of his being is telling him to spend the morning rediscovering his favorite places on her body, teasing out moans and gasps and shudders and *his name*. God, to hear it even once would carry him through the day. The press of her lush body against his doesn't help tamp down the urge; no, it only fuels the images running rampant through his mind… memories of sneaking into the pantry downstairs to steal a few kisses last night after nearly two days without much of anything. It ended with her hand in his pants, driving him crazy until he'd just picked her up, ready to take her right then and there. Unfortunately they'd nearly knocked a shelf down, hitting a hard pause on the moment.

Two whole days was simply too damn long.

Felicity presses her hips flush against his, arching her back to brush her pebbled nipples against his chest. He's absolutely certain he's never wanted a woman more in his entire life.

She's going to be the death of him, in the best way possible.

"There's already a girl in your bed, Oliver," she reminds him cheekily, tilting her head toward Ellie, who's still lost in dreams of her own making.

He groans - he so doesn't need the reminder. Still, Oliver drops his head to her shoulder, rocking forward on his feet a bit for the tiniest bit of friction, if only for a moment. It's not enough. It's not even *close*, but it sends little jolts of pleasure through his veins and he digs his fingers into her ass. She moans, biting down on her lower lip.

"*Oliver*," she half-chastises, half-encourages.

"There's no one in our *shower*," he points out, even though he damn well knows that's not an option. They can't leave Ellie alone. But *god* that mental image is now completely lodged in his brain and he wants nothing more than to press her against the slick, slate-tiled wall and watch her face contort in pleasure, water sluicing down her body, his fingers between her legs…

The whimper she makes in response really, really doesn't help either.

"Later," she promises, dragging her nails across his skin as she pulls her hands back from around his neck. He shivers at the sensation. He's so absurdly sensitive to her touch, it's incredible. Just the scrape of her

nails against his neck is enough to set his entire body on fire with need. "That sounds… yes. Definitely. Later. Not very much later. Just… soon. Soon is what I'm saying."

Her fingers curl against his collarbones as she rocks her hips in answer and makes a restrained, needy little noise that goes straight to his groin. His body is frustrated as hell, and it both helps and makes it incredibly hard that she wants him just as much as he wants her. They're on the same page, have been for weeks now, and the only thing in the world keeping them from basking in a near-constant post-coital glow of endorphins is the world's most adorable three-year-old.

"I'm gonna hold you to that," he informs her in a low, gritty voice that's more frequently heard while he's wearing a mask and hood. He'd learned pretty quickly that she likes that voice, *a lot*, and her pleased little hum and roll of her hips tells him that again.

"You'd better," she counters, pressing up on her tiptoes, sliding one hand up around his neck again to pull him down.

"I will," he vows before their lips lock together.

It's not an innocent kiss, not even close. It's raw and *dirty* and full of a promise that leaves him gasping as her teeth scrape his lower lip and her tongue slides into his mouth. *Fuck*, he loves this woman, he loves everything about her. He grips her ass tighter, nearly lifting her right off her feet as she tightens her hold on his hair, kissing him with equal ardor. Later is going to come a lot quicker if they aren't careful - in fact, his mind's already racing ahead of him, going through who's where in the house and he's wondering how long it would take to get…

"Hiya!"

They don't jolt apart anymore, not after nearly two weeks of interrupted moments like this. Ellie doesn't seem bothered in the least by them kissing, presumably because she's used to it. That thought always makes his heart flutter with happiness - the idea that his overwhelming need for Felicity won't be fading anytime soon makes him feel like he's floating. Despite that, Oliver does subtly let go of his grip on her ass. There's some things a kid just never needs to witness their parents doing.

"Hey, sweetheart," Felicity says, turning and blessedly blocking his lower body from view while he takes a few slow breaths, trying to rein in his response. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Uh huh," Ellie confirms, twisting onto her belly in the middle of the bed, kicking her feet into the air. She props herself up on her arms with a grin. "I dreamed good dreams! Little Sara and I were elephants. Like at the zoo! I was Ellie the Elephant! And Rascal was there and then we all grew wings and we flew *for real*."

"*Wow*." Felicity smiles, sitting next to Ellie, who rolls onto her side to stare up at her mother. "That sounds like quite the adventure."

"Yup! It was *great*," Ellie replies. Her tone turns deeply apologetic as she finishes with, "Sorry you weren't there, Momma."

"Maybe next time," Felicity responds, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "You hungry?"

Neither of them miss the way her little eyes brighten at the prospect of food - Oliver has learned his daughter eats *a lot* - but then she pauses. Ellie chews on her lower lip with a tense line to her little brow as her eyes dart between her parents.

Finally, after a long moment, she asks, "Are you gonna cook, Momma?"

Oliver has to bite the tip of his tongue to keep from laughing out loud.

"How about I fix us breakfast?" he offers.

"*Oh*." Ellie sighs in clear relief. "Then yes! I'm hungry."

Felicity huffs a little, slightly affronted by her three-year-old's criticism, and this time he can't stop his laugh. Amongst other things he's discovered in the last two weeks, he's learned that Ellie is absolutely correct - Felicity really, *really* cannot cook anything.

"And if *I* were cooking?" Felicity challenges their daughter.

"Um... " Ellie looks around, like there's a good answer to be found on the walls somewhere, before her face lights up as she settles on a response. "Then I like yoghurt!"

Oliver covers his mouth as Felicity grumbles under her breath.

Concern immediately etches itself into every feature of Ellie's sweet little face.

"I don't wanna make you sad, Momma, but I don't want a tummyache," she says, scrambling onto all fours and climbing into

Felicity's lap. She wraps her arms around Felicity's neck, distress that she might have hurt her mother's feelings lining her words. "I'm sorry. Don't be sad. If you make me breakfast, I'll eat it. Promise!"

Sometimes she's so clearly a daddy's girl. His bond with Ellie is indescribable and her adoration of him is so very evident. But there's this, too. She loves her mother every bit as much as she loves him and her desire to see her mother happy, to gain her approval, is just as strong as it is toward her father. It's more subtle, maybe, but Oliver sees it. He's pretty sure Felicity does, too, especially now as Ellie stares up at her with so much vulnerability in her eyes.

Felicity's constant observations about him giving into their daughter every other minute always end up null and void, especially as Oliver watches her melt.

"Oh Ellie-bug." Felicity smiles, brushing some errant curls behind her little girl's ear. "Honey, I'm not sad because of what you said. I just wish I were a better cook. That's all. You didn't make me sad."

Ellie lets out a tremendous sigh of relief that seems too huge to come from someone so small.

"*Good*," Ellie replies. "Maybe if you practice you'll get better, Momma."

"Maybe," Felicity agrees, probably because it's easier than continuing the conversation. Oliver's quickly learned that '*maybe*' and '*we'll see*' and '*let's talk about it later*' are some of the most useful phrases in a parent's vocabulary.

"Or Daddy can teach you!"

"Well," Felicity says. "I think Daddy would have his work cut out for him."

"Maybe if he came up with a reward system," Oliver says with a quick wink. Felicity's eyes widen slightly, and when the implication of what he's saying hits her, that beautiful blush is back. He smiles. "Just an idea."

"Oh sure," Felicity replies, her tone making him chuckle. "Just an idea."

"Momma?" Ellie asks, staring at her fingers as she plays with one of the buttons on the dress shirt Felicity's wearing.

"Yeah?" Felicity's hand settling on Ellie's back, clearly sensing the same tension that Oliver hears in his little girl's voice.

"I miss talking to the baby," Ellie says, her voice impossibly small as she looks up at her mother with those big blue eyes of hers.

The air is knocked right out of Oliver's lungs, and Felicity looks like she's in the same boat. She doesn't seem to know what to say to that, which is fair because he can't really think of a response either. But Ellie isn't done talking.

"I know he's not in your tummy yet, but maybe I could pretend?" Ellie suggests, seeming simultaneously nervous and hopeful.

Felicity freezes, her eyes darting up to catch his gaze. He's pretty sure they're wearing the same expression - how exactly do you respond to *that*? It's not the first time Ellie's thrown them both for a loop, but this… this is a doozy. And she seems to know it because her eyes dart back down to the button she's fiddling with as she starts backtracking.

"I don't have to," Ellie says with a little shrug. She sounds profoundly sad, her voice dropping into a mumble. "It's okay."

It's probably Ellie's tone more than anything else that sways Felicity. Oliver sees the moment she makes a choice and he holds his breath as she speaks.

After a beat, Felicity forces an uneasy smile onto her face as she says, "You can."

"*Really*?" Ellie asks delightedly, turning Felicity's smile far more genuine.

"Really," Felicity confirms.

And this, *this* is what makes her an amazing mother. Anything she can do to make Ellie more at home, more comfortable, she'll do. Anything at all. Even something like this, which is a far bigger request than Ellie can possibly imagine.

Felicity leans back haltingly, the move matching the uncertainty creasing her brow, but Ellie's completely oblivious to it. Her little fingers grab the bottom of the dress shirt and push it up, exposing the flat plane of her stomach. Oliver's mouth goes dry at the sight unfolding in front of him. Ellie moves so she's cross-legged on Felicity's lap and leans over, speaking directly to Felicity's belly

button.

"Hi, baby!" Ellie says in what she must think is a whisper. It hits him harder than he thought it would. Oliver moves so he's close to something - *anything* - to hold onto as Felicity grabs the edge of the shirt in a deathgrip, looking just as lost as he feels. He finds the sofa and he grips it tight as his daughter continues, talking to their future unborn son. "It's Ellie! Your big sister. I love you!"

Felicity makes a choking noise, her eyes glued on Ellie, just as Oliver's are. And then Ellie pats Felicity's stomach, scrunching her fingers against the gentle rounded plane like she's done this a hundred times before - because she has - and Oliver's heart lurches.

They aren't here yet. They aren't even close, but he can *see* it. He can imagine just as well as Ellie can that Felicity's normally slim waistline is rounded with his child, that his little girl is chattering away to his unborn son, proclaiming how much she loves him.

That image, formed so vividly in his mind, sends a different kind of want through his body. It settles in his bones, a living thing that takes root in the very core of his being. It's one thing to want Felicity - that part is easy, even familiar at this point - but it's another thing entirely to *see* how this works. To have not just a glimpse of their future together, but a clear view of precisely what their family will one day look like. He falls a little more in love with both of them every day, with this picture of his future that maybe isn't perfect, but feels absolutely perfect for him.

Ellie has changed so much between him and Felicity and yet - paradoxically - changed nothing at all. If she's proof of anything it's that they were always on this course. But now his steps are more sure, his route through his life uninhibited. He's so *certain* thanks to Ellie. It feels like a gift.

"You too, Daddy!" she says, sitting up on Felicity's lap, reaching toward him.

"What?" he whispers.

He's so caught up in the scene before him that it takes a few beats for his head to catch up with her words.

"You've gotta talk to Nathaniel, too!" she declares, turning her face back towards Felicity's bare stomach. She presses her lips against her skin, making Felicity's muscles jump. "Heya, Nater-Tater-Bug! Daddy's

here, too. Come *on,* Daddy!"

Nathaniel. His son's name is Nathaniel. They've already named him.

"Ellie…" Felicity protests in a strained voice that seems equal parts overwhelmed on his behalf and on her own. Ellie stares up at her, her brows drawing together in confusion. She doesn't understand what she's asking. She can't. "Honey, I think… I think maybe Daddy-"

Her words die off when she sees Oliver moving. Her eyes fly to his as his feet seemingly walk of their own accord. He doesn't think; he just acts, following through with the motions that his body and his heart crave with a kind of desperate want he's never quite felt before. It's one thing to see his daughter, to know they have her, but to talk about their future son - their future *unborn* son - it's an entirely different thing.

"Oliver…" Felicity says in a quiet rush of breath he can barely hear as he reaches his girls.

Ellie scoots off her mother's lap, settling to the side.

Oliver doesn't respond to her with words, mostly because he doesn't have any. He's always been better with action. And she knows that - she knows *him* - which is probably why she parts her knees as he reaches her, giving him space to kneel in front of her even as her breathing speeds up, turning shallow. She whispers his name again, half in protest, half in wonder.

Ellie's still right there and she's chattering away, saying something, but he doesn't hear her.

For a moment, his entire world is narrowed down to Felicity. The way she gulps down air like she's drowning, the way her eyes lock with his, the smoothness of her skin under his hands as his fingers curl around her thighs, tugging her closer to the edge of the bed. She's still clutching her shirt - *his* shirt - just beneath her breasts and her stomach is bare in front of him. It's exposing for both of them in a way that has nothing at all to do with skin and physicality. It leaves him raw, vulnerable, and he's never been quite so happy at the idea of being defenseless against something in his life.

She fights to keep her eyes open as he presses his mouth to her stomach and she sucks in a hollowing breath that makes her midsection go concave.

"Hey, buddy," he whispers against her skin. His voice is deep and uneven, his eyes still trained on hers. "I can't wait to meet you."

It's too much for both of them, that much is obvious when she shivers. Felicity's eyes slip shut on a gasped moan and her hand settles on the back of his head, fingers slipping through his hair. He kisses her skin, a soft, almost-platonic press of his lips just above her belly button as Ellie bounces delightedly next to them before scurrying off the bed to grab a doll off the sofa. He barely notices. He's too honed in on Felicity for much more than a passing awareness of Ellie's safety.

Felicity's fingers slide down the back of his neck before trailing back up, her nails scraping against his skin lightly in a way that sets his nerves delightfully on edge and makes him shudder.

"I love you," he says. Her eyes peek open and zero in on him again immediately. "And I love Ellie. And I'm going to love our son, too. Now. In five years. In ten years. In twenty. You know that right?"

A look of cautious hope flits across her face before dissolving into wonder and blindly open affection. Her hand settles against his cheek and she nods, biting her lip with restrained delight before smiling broadly at him and letting her fingers trace the line of his jaw.

"I know," she says, somehow sounding both confident and surprised all at once. "Me too. I love you. And I want this. Her, him, you… all of it. I want *all* of it."

Oliver stands up from where he's crouched, leaning forward to press his lips to hers in a kiss that feels more like a promise than his words did, than they ever could. It turns into two kisses and then three, and then one long kiss that speaks to the future waiting for them.

"Can we go in the pool again today?" Ellie pipes up from the floor in front of the television, where she's cuddling her doll like she's rocking a baby. "I wanna take my baby doll and teach her how to swim."

"Maybe this afternoon," Oliver replies, backing up, his eyes never leaving Felicity. He offers her a hand to help her up before he looks at Ellie. "I want you in the house with Digg and Lyla this morning. I've got some things I need to do before lunch."

"Are you *sure* this is the best way to go about getting more information?" Felicity asks, slipping easily into Arrow-mode. "The media might have backed off but they're not exactly uninterested in us."

"I'll be careful. I know how to slip past the press unnoticed," Oliver assures her, squeezing her hand. He lowers his voice, just for her ears. "It's been weeks, Felicity. The police have found nothing, we've found nothing. Something's gotta give, and I'm done waiting for it to happen. Mom's ahead in the polls, but the election is days away and I'm not leaving anything to chance. Blood and Isabel can't win. We need to find a link. We need *proof*. That's going to take suiting up and asking questions."

"I know, and I get it," Felicity says. "I'm just an antsy as you are. But… just don't underestimate Isabel. If she's been working with Slade and Blood all along…"

"This is a long-game for her," Oliver concludes. "I'm well aware. But we can't counter her plans if we don't know them."

"I know. And I agree. I'm all for team-kicking-Isabel's-butt." Felicity makes a face. "And not even just because things that happen in Russia don't actually stay there."

He winces at the stark reminder of one of his more recent horrible life choices. He doesn't realize he's gripping her too tightly until she lets out a soft laugh and strokes her thumb against the skin of his hand, drawing him back to the here and now.

"Oliver, I didn't mean it like that. It hardly matters in the long run." She raises an eyebrow, tilting her head toward Ellie who hums away, cuddling her doll and running her little fingers through its tangled hair. "Right?"

"It didn't even really matter at the time," he acknowledges. He glances down at their tangled fingers. "Except that it hurt you."

"I'm a big girl," she reminds him. "And, if it isn't clear by now, I'm over it. Except that it makes me violently dislike her on yet another level because she did that *entirely* to manipulate you and alienate me."

"Well, it didn't really work on either count, did it?" Oliver asks, his mind dancing back to that moment yet again. Talk about poor choices on top of poor choices. It'd been so easy, and he'd been so desperate for a connection that didn't terrify him. Not that it didn't turn around and bite him in the ass anyway. He winces again. "Though I'm pretty sure it made her hate you more."

Felicity blinks in surprise and he instantly regrets saying anything. That is the *last* thing he wants her to know, mostly because it's

embarrassing as hell. But it'd been so involuntary, he'd just…

How the *hell* did they even get on this topic?

"Uh… *how*?" Felicity asks. She quirks her head to the side in adorable confusion. He can feel his cheeks coloring slightly at the question. He wants to tell her that it's nothing - because really, it *had* been nothing, but since it's her asking…

"She, uh…" Oliver clears his throat, feeling the flush creeping down his neck. "She didn't exactly have my full attention."

"What does that even mean?" Felicity asks in bewilderment, eyebrow raised at him like he's speaking in another language that she doesn't understand. Dear god, she's going to make him say it.

"It was… very obvious to her that I was… that I wasn't thinking about her." He pauses, licking his lips, staring at her, waiting for her to make the connection, but she doesn't. "I was thinking about *you*, Felicity."

Realization instantly dawns on her face and her eyes go wide, her perfect lips forming an 'o'.

"Did you…" she starts, eyes darting toward Ellie who is blessedly oblivious to the subtext of their conversation. "Oliver Queen, did you call her my name? When you were… you know… when you were… *occupied*?"

Oliver's eyes slam shut and he grips the back of his neck, ducking his head in shame. "It was… uh…" He looks toward her with a skittish gaze. "That whole thing was a terrible idea from the start." It's the closest thing he's going to get to agreeing that she's right. That was *not* his proudest moment. "It was never her that I wanted to… spend time with. I was so busy *not* thinking about that - about you - that I… that it…"

"I can't decide if I'm flattered," Felicity says slowly. "Or really, really insulted."

"Honey, I *swear*-" he starts, a weird flare of panic rising in his gut.

"On one hand," she cuts him off, "it's sort of great that I was on your mind even then. On the other… I mean, it was *Isabel*. And the idea that there's any resemblance between when we…" She waves her hand between them, her mouth working soundlessly. "When we *spend time* together, and *that* particular encounter…" She shudders violently

instead of finishing her statement with words, but it more than completes her thought.

"It's not even *close*," Oliver assures her. He grips her elbows, pulling her closer, and the inscrutable look she sends him has him speaking before he can think. "I had no idea what it would be like to be able to love you, Felicity. I didn't even let myself think about it, because I truly believed that it couldn't - that it *wouldn't* happen. Imagining it was the only way I had to temper what was otherwise a really horrible exercise in punishing myself. And that's what that was, it wasn't… I regret everything about that experience. Everything *other* than realizing how deeply it affected me to know I'd hurt *you*."

"Oliver…"

Her voice is soft, but still guarded. That flare of panic grows brighter until she rests her hands on his hips. But she's still not looking at him.

"Hey," he whispers, tilting his head to catch her gaze. She looks up at him, and the slice of doubt that he sees has him shaking his head. "I'd already known that I was in love with you, Felicity." She stares at him, and he consciously lets every single thing he's feeling show on his face. "But I don't think I knew how much. No, I know I didn't know." He cups her cheek. "Not until I saw you after, Felicity, not until I saw you looking at me like you did. It was like… a mirror, I guess. You were - you *are* - the last person I ever want to hurt."

The heaviness of that saturates the air, the reality that he's been in this so deeply for so long fills the space between them and washes over them both. Hindsight, they say, is 20/20, but seeing both the future and the past adds a whole other dimension. The path from then to now to a decade down the road is clear. It might not be a straight line, exactly - he's pretty sure the last time around he fought against his own happiness; this time he intends to stumble less along the way - but it's brilliantly evident that they were always headed here, that they've *been* here for longer than either one of them has been ready to recognize.

She nods, rolling her lips together. But it's only when she nods again, more definitely, that he knows she's accepted his explanation on a basic level that he doesn't really feel like he has the right to expect from her. But then, she's always accepted all of him, even the rougher parts he's not particularly proud of, so maybe he shouldn't be all that surprised.

Felicity laughs, a tiny disbelieving sound as she shakes her head. "God, you were so unbelievably stubborn." Oliver huffs out a chuckle, remembering the conversation back at QC like it was yesterday. The first time he'd admitted his feelings, as ass-backwards as it had come out at the time. Felicity scrunches her nose at him. "Actually, you still are."

He grins, and her returning smile is a little tentative at first, but then it's full-blown, and he feels the weight of that moment slip away.

Oliver kisses her with a whispered, "I love you," one she returns when she kisses him back.

"Whatcha talking about?" Ellie chirps.

They both start, not realizing she'd made her way back over to them. She climbs onto the bed, standing on the mattress so that she's closer to eye level with them, her doll cradled to her chest.

Felicity lets out a nervous little laugh as her eyes dart to him, but he's ready to fill the void.

"How much I love your mommy," he answers simply. He scoops her up into his arms, pressing a kiss to her cheek, making her giggle. "And how much I love you, Ellie-bug. You ready for breakfast?"

"Okay!" Ellie grins, patting his cheek with her little hand. "Can Raisa show me how to make whipped cream again? I forgot."

He barely keeps himself from snorting. She's crafty, this daughter of his. And the wide-eyed innocent look she's giving him would be wholly convincing if he didn't know better. *Oh*, they're in so much trouble when she's older.

"You forgot, huh?" Oliver asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Ellie says with a solemn nod. "She can remind me while you make waffles and Momma cuts up strawberries."

He's being played - they're all being *played* - but it's so damned cute that he can't even care. Not with that heart-melting hopeful little look on her face. *God*, he's such a sap for his daughter.

"I think we can probably make that happen," he agrees, which earns him a delighted little squeal from Ellie and a chuckle from Felicity.

"You know," Felicity says. "Sooner or later, we're going to have to have a talk about exactly how much you let her manipulate you."

He only shrugs in response, a bashful look taking over his features that he knows - *knows* - works every bit as well on Felicity as Ellie's wide-eyed innocence works on him. And she's just as aware as he is that she's being played. Felicity narrows her eyes, but he doesn't relent. It's unfair, really, but he's not sorry at all. And that's doubly true when she rises up on her toes to kiss the corner of his mouth.

"How about you and I head downstairs while Mommy gets dressed, okay?"

"Okay!" Ellie agrees, wriggling until she climbs down from his arms, already darting for the door.

"Wait for me," Oliver instructs her, his tone taking on a hint of sharpness that tells her he means it and she stops at the door with a nod, bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet, her doll still cradled in her arms. She's such a good kid. It makes it so easy to give her what she wants. He glances back in time to catch Felicity's disbelieving head shake. He tugs on the front of her shirt with a soft, "What?"

"You're actually gonna leave me here to get changed and come downstairs on my own?"

That has Oliver freezing. And his stomach sinking.

They haven't talked about it at all, but she's right. He and Digg and Sara have made a concerted effort to ensure that at least one of them is near her at all times. Usually it's him, just by virtue of the nature of their relationship, but when it's not she's been under near-constant watchful eyes from someone else in their group. He just hadn't realized she'd noticed.

"Yeah, that hasn't exactly escaped my attention," Felicity replies in response to the look on his face. "I'm not an invalid, Oliver."

"Felicity," he sighs, setting his hand on her shoulder. He lets it skim down her arm, watching his fingers as they smooth over the fabric of his shirt. Something about the sight of that, of her blatantly stating he's hers and she's his in silent declarations both big and small - wearing his clothes, holding his hand, calling Ellie *their* daughter in front of the others - it all drives home how quickly they've intertwined their lives so thoroughly… and how much more he needs her than he did even a couple of weeks ago. How much he'd do *anything* to hold

onto this.

"Ellie isn't born yet," Oliver says, his gaze dragging back up to catch her eyes, willing her to understand precisely what he's saying. "And if… if someone wanted to prevent that from happening…"

The words get stuck in his throat, his lungs turning to stone. Oliver can't even make himself finish the thought. The idea of losing Ellie is terrifying enough, but the idea of losing Felicity… *God*, that's even worse. Not just because he'd lose the one person in this world that leaves him feeling like himself, not just because he can't possibly imagine ever being happy again without her, but because without her, he'd watch Ellie fade out of existence as well.

His eyes almost slip shut, remembering the look on Felicity's face when she'd described that very thing during Slade's attack…

So, yes…. *yes*, the thought of losing Ellie is utterly terrifying, but it's nothing compared to the idea of something happening to Felicity.

"I thought it might be something like that," Felicity acknowledges. "So you were… what? Going to head downstairs with Ellie and send Sara up to ask if she could borrow a pair of shoes or something?" Her question is so on-point, so accurate that he can't help ducking his head in quiet admission while he avoids her eyes. She rests her palm over his heart, curling her fingers against his Bratva tattoo like she's overlaying herself atop the worst parts of him. And as if that's exactly what she's doing, he suddenly feels like it's easier to breathe. It's astounding how much her love feels like absolution sometimes. "I'm not going anywhere, Oliver."

"You can't promise that," he chokes out. "What if…"

He can't even fully form the *ideas*. Horrible images of tragic endings start taking shape in his mind, just like they've been threatening to since Sara's words. And just as quickly they all dissolve under his refusal to consider them, like the simple act of imagining them might bring them to life.

"*Hey*," she says, drawing him back to the now. Her hands slip up to splay her fingers along each side of his neck, forcing him to look at her. "In spite of having our child quite literally come back in time to tell us she exists, nothing is certain. You're right."

Oliver closes his eyes - *that's* not exactly what he wants to hear.

"And we're right to be cautious. But I'm not going to spend my life staring at the shadows waiting for something to jump out, okay? I can get dressed on my own, Oliver. I can take fifteen minutes to brush my teeth and put on some makeup and tame my hair without you or Digg or Sara watching me like the boogeyman might be about to get me."

"I *like* watching you," he replies petulantly, even as his resolve chips away under the warm press of her hands and the soft insistence of her voice.

"That's what you got from that?" she asks with a smile, sounding more amused than is warranted, considering.

"No…" Oliver presses his forehead to hers, releasing a sigh that feels like it's been lodged in his chest since the second she'd called him out on his reluctance to leave her alone. "You're right, and I know you're right. I just…"

"I get it, Oliver," Felicity whispers, the side of her nose rubbing against his. It fills his chest with warmth and he nuzzles her cheek. "You know I do." She kisses his cheek. "But I need fifteen minutes to myself. So - and I *cannot* believe I'm saying this - put on a shirt, Oliver. Then take our daughter downstairs and start on breakfast. I'll join you as soon as I'm put together."

"You already look perfect," he tells her, backing off enough that he can survey her unkempt form.

"Somehow I think your mom wouldn't appreciate this look." She glances down. "And I suspect it's a bit too much leg for Digg's taste."

He flinches at that. She's not wrong. While he wants her to stay exactly like this, he also wants to keep the sight of her in nothing but his shirt entirely to himself. Not for the first time he feels the niggle of desire to be alone with her, in a space that's all their own.

But that's for later.

And breakfast is a bit of a necessity.

"Daddy, I'm hungry," Ellie chimes in, emphasizing reality again.

"Okay," Oliver agrees in response to both of his girls. "Okay, but… Felicity…"

"Fifteen minutes," she tells him again.

"I'm gonna hold you to that," he replies. He rests his hands on her hips, kissing her swiftly before forcing himself to take a step back. "Any longer and-"

"Any longer and I fully expect you or Sara or Digg to break break down the door and make sure I haven't disappeared through some tear in reality," she finishes for him.

Every muscle in his body coils at that thought, at the image of an empty room greeting him, of Ellie fading from existence in front of his eyes and no trace of his family ever seen again. It's *terrifying*. This is exactly why he's been shying away from the mere thought. He had no idea that loving someone this much would be so frightening, but it *is* and he's not entirely sure how to cope with that when it's not an enemy he can fight or even see, when the threat is ever-present and invisible.

Felicity cups his face. "You've got to trust me, Oliver. I'm not going to live my life under constant watch. I can't."

The truth of that washes over him. He knows her, and he knows that. She's right. She's not going to live her life under a microscope or locked away in some gilded cage. He has to back off, let her live her life as normally as possible, trust that she will always do everything she can to come back to him.

Because she will. He won't accept any alternative.

"Yeah." Oliver nods, licking his lips in an anxiety-ridden move that has her grasping his fingers and pulling his hand up to her mouth to press a kiss against his palm. It soothes him. Some. She always does. He curls his hand around her face, holding her cheek. "Yeah…"

"Can we go now, Daddy?" Ellie asks, oblivious to the weight of the conversation that's just happened. "My tummy's all rumbly and so's my baby doll's."

"Sure, baby," he replies, pressing a kiss to Felicity's temple and squeezing her fingers before letting go. "Just let me grab a shirt, okay?"

"'Kay," Ellie says with a nod, patting the doll on the back with a too-firm smack that would have had a real baby wailing as she makes soothing noises.

He crosses the room and grabs a henley from the closet. He tugs it

over his head before making his way back to Ellie, bending down to scoop her up into his arms, baby doll and all.

"See you in a bit," Felicity tells them, blowing Ellie a kiss that makes the little girl grin with happiness. She pretends to catch it with her chubby little fingers before sending her own back. Felicity mimes grabbing hers before disappearing through the bathroom door, laughter echoing in her wake.

Oliver blinks back the gut-wrenching sense of panic that slices through his midsection as she disappears from his line of sight. Because she's *right*. Because Sara was right, too. Because worrying about the future, living with a sense of doom, does all of them a disservice. And they deserve better than that.

He glances at the clock, noting the time down to the second.

Fifteen minutes.

Even though he feels the undeniable pull to just wait for her, Oliver makes himself leave.

"Do you think my grammas are up yet?" Ellie asks, bouncing a little in his arms. "Gramma Donna makes *the best* hot cocoa."

"You need hot cocoa *and* waffles?" Oliver asks, amusement supplanting some of the fear that's rooted inside him.

"Not for me," Ellie shakes her head, blonde curls bouncing about her face. "For baby doll. She's never had hot cocoa. I think that's sad. She should try it."

Oliver chuckles at that. He's far from the only person in this house who has themselves wrapped around his daughter's little finger and *wow* is she good at playing up her childish innocence to get exactly what she wants. He wonders if that's true of all kids or if his daughter is just exceptionally bright. He suspects it's some combination of the two. She is Felicity's daughter, after all.

Sure-footedly, he takes the steps down toward the kitchen two at a time, Ellie on his hip and one hand on the railing. They haven't even reached the bottom step yet when Ellie spies Moira. She squeals in delight, reaching out with grabby fingers, all of her weight leaning toward her grandmother, heedless of the notion that she could possibly fall if she's not careful. That idea wouldn't even occur to her, because she's in her father's arms. She has no doubt about her daddy's

ability to keep her safe. In spite of the fact that she's reaching for someone else to *leave* him, Oliver can't help but relish the surge of pride that courses through him at that realization.

"Good morning, little one," Moira greets as they reach the bottom step and she lifts Ellie from his arms. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yep!" Ellie confirms, cuddling in and somehow making his mother seem both softer and older all at once. "So did baby. But we're both hungry now."

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?" Moira asks. And just like everything else surrounding his daughter, it will never cease to amaze him the effect Ellie has on his mother. The utter joy Ellie brings out in her, the way her entire whole world hones in on her granddaughter, it's heartwarming.

Without sparing him a single glance, his mother and daughter turn away, heading toward the kitchen.

"I slept great too, Mom, thanks for asking," he deadpans with absolutely no bite to his voice at all.

"Of course you did, Oliver," his mother replies, glancing back as she brushes her fingers through Ellie's hair. "You had this little one to cuddle up with. How could you not?"

With a smile and shake of his head, Oliver follows them into the kitchen. Despite his amusement with them, his eyes instantly find the digital clock over the stove. Three minutes. How can it only have been three minutes? He's already itching to run back upstairs and check on Felicity.

One look at the faces of the other people in the kitchen immediately tells him he's not the only one with this instinct.

Diggle gives him a nod, his eyes instantly moving past him, clearly waiting for Felicity to follow in his wake. When he realizes she isn't, his demanding gaze turns on Oliver with disbelief, and Oliver understands where he's coming from entirely too well.

"She'll be down in twelve minutes," Oliver informs him without being asked. He glances at the clock. "Make that eleven."

Digg shares a weighty look with Lyla and Sara, neither of them looking any happier at this notion than Oliver feels.

Their tension does absolutely nothing to ease his anxiety. "She wanted a few minutes to herself."

"You mean she finally figured out we've had someone watching her at all times," Lyla says, settling a coffee cup down with a solid clank of ceramic against granite. "Johnny, why don't you go for a walk upstairs… grab me my sunglasses? I left them in our room."

"I'll join you," Sara offers, pushing off the counter to stride toward him.

It's a thinly veiled move to stay close to Felicity, to keep her safe. She'll know. The moment she sees them nearby, she'll know. Oliver is sure of that and he knows she will not be happy about it. But he also doesn't care and as the two of them head out, he breathes a sigh of relief at the idea of someone at least being within shouting distance in case something happens.

"We'll be right back," Diggle says, clapping a hand on Oliver's shoulder.

The nod he offers them feels almost conspiratorial, the weight of the continual dangers they're facing saturating the air with something thick and heavy and dark.

Ellie, though, has a way of cutting right through all of that tension. Much like her mother.

"Daddy?" she asks, still cuddled in his mother's arms. She's cradling her doll, stroking its hair with surprisingly gentle fingers. "We should start on the waffles so Momma doesn't have to wait too long."

Lyla's chuckle follows Digg and Sara as they go, the door swinging behind them, leaving Oliver to smile at his daughter.

"We should, shouldn't we?" Oliver asks.

"Yes," Ellie nods firmly, her unkempt curls bouncing wildly at the motion. "I think she's hungry. We don't want her to be Momma Monster, do we, Daddy?"

It's moments like this that Oliver can fully see his mother in his daughter. Even if it's the most innocent incarnation of his mother's manipulations, she clearly inherited the Dearden ability to turn situations to her own advantage. That should probably worry him, but not yet. When she's a teenager, that'll be a different story, but for now

it's just so blatant and guileless that he can't help melting a little under her wide, hopeful eyes.

"Alright," Oliver agrees. "But I'm going to need your help, Ellie-bug."

"I've gotta help Raisa with the whipped cream!" Ellie reminds him, wriggling until Moira puts her down as Raisa enters the room from the pantry, a bag of sugar in hand.

Raisa loves children - Oliver's known this for years, since she served as Thea's nanny - and she adores cooking. There's no doubt in his mind she's more than happy at the prospect of making whipped cream with his daughter. The welcoming smile on her face as she looks down at Ellie barrelling towards her is solid proof of that, but she's also got a cast on her arm.

That has Oliver following after his daughter and snatching her in mid-run before she reaches Raisa.

"Daddy!" she squeals.

"Hey, what did I tell you about running in here?" he asks, aiming for stern but falling short as he hauls her wriggling body up. He doesn't give her a chance to respond. "And remember Raisa's arm has an owie?"

That has her stopping as her eyes latch onto the cast. "Oh yeah."

"I don't think she'd like a ball of Ellie jumping at her, okay?" Oliver asks as he makes his way over to Raisa. Her warm eyes are on Ellie, filled to the brink with amusement. "If you want to help with the whipped cream, you have to calm down."

"Okay," Ellie agrees easily, nodding. "I'll be good. Promise." She shimmies, fully expecting him to let her down but when he doesn't, she pats his arm. "I can get down now, Daddy."

The sound of all three women chuckling fills the kitchen, and he can only shake his head as he does what his daughter requests. The second her feet hit the floor, she walks with exaggerated speed, closing the distance to Raisa, who chuckles. Oliver shoots her an apologetic look as Ellie sidles up next to her.

"Do you need help, Raisa?" Oliver asks, eyeing the sugar. "The mixer is-"

"I'm okay, Mister Oliver," the older woman reminds him gently. "I still have two arms." Oliver moves to argue - it's not the first time he's tried and she's shot him down, and it won't be the last - but Raisa's already winking down at Ellie. "And plus I have my special helper with me."

Ellie positively beams at that. Looking back at Oliver, she lifts her doll with a, "Can we get up, Daddy?"

He can't help but chuckle. Though this has always been his house, it's striking how much Ellie and the others make it feel like a *home*. He hasn't had that in a very long time. Maybe he's never had it, not like this. The joy and laughter she brings to these rooms, these people… it breathes new life into the building, making it comfortable, welcoming for the first time in Oliver's memory.

"You are such a troublemaker," he says under his breath, lifting her up. The second her butt hits the counter, she's all about Raisa and the whipped cream. He lingers for a second, smiling. She's already chattering a mile a minute, "guessing" the correct steps as Raisa goes about making it.

Oliver presses a solid kiss to her cheek before turning to start the waffles.

Rather, turning to glance at the clock.

She's down to seven minutes.

As he starts grabbing supplies, he strains his ears to hear past Raisa and Ellie talking, past the sound of the coffeemaker, the rustle of a newspaper in his mother's hands, listening for anything that might hint that something's wrong. When he hears nothing, he waits for his shoulders to relax and for the ability to take a deep breath again, but neither come. Instead he's even more tense. The silence is unnerving. Instead of comforting him, it starts fueling the fear he'd done a pretty decent job of pushing down until he no longer had Ellie to distract him.

Six minutes.

He nearly drops a bowl.

Five minutes.

He cracks an egg a little too hard, sending a sea of shell fragments into the bowl he's setting up. Oliver grimaces, picking out the bits of shell

and dumping them in the sink, ignoring his mother's pointed look.

Four minutes.

Oliver glances at Lyla. She offers him a smile, one that is probably meant to placate him, but really, the only thing that will do that is seeing and hearing Felicity.

Three minutes.

Raisa turns on the mixer, and Ellie raises her voice to be heard over it.

Two minutes.

The fine hairs on the back of his neck start rising and he doesn't realize he's mixing too hard until his mother says, "You're going to break the spoon, Oliver."

One minute…

He's on second twenty-nine, about to tell Lyla that he'll be right back, when the sound of footsteps has him pausing. Lyla catches it too, and the sudden tension in the air has Moira looking up as well before Felicity breezes through the door with Sara and Diggle hot on her heels.

It might have only been fifteen minutes, but that's fifteen minutes too damn long. They've spent countless hours away from each other over the last several weeks, but never just *her* on her own, and it feels like it's been a damn eternity.

The sigh of relief Oliver lets out is *audible*, prompting Felicity to shoot him a glare. It barely stops him from eating up the dozen or so feet between them and wrapping his arms around her.

"So something *did* happen," she says, bringing his heart to a stuttering halt.

"What?" Oliver asks, dropping the spoon he's using, taking a step towards her but she stops him with a hard look.

"I nearly stabbed myself in the eye with my mascara," Felicity explains, turning to look at Sara. "Because someone just had to use the bathroom, the one bathroom that I happened to be in." Sara merely shrugs, looking entirely unapologetic. Felicity shakes her head before making her way to Oliver. The waffles are entirely forgotten and he

only has eyes for her, even though hers are currently drilling holes through his head. "Did you ask them to check on me?"

"I told you he didn't, Felicity," Diggle says, taking his seat next to Lyla again.

"Mmhmm." Felicity's focus is entirely on Oliver, though, as she waits for him to answer.

He meets her gaze head-on. "I didn't ask them to check on you." She narrows her eyes, but he can see the second hers soften. He's never been able to lie to her, and he knows that's exactly what she's looking for. "They went to grab something for Lyla." Felicity makes a face. "What? They did."

Before she can respond, Ellie says, "Look, Momma, I'm making whipped cream again!"

And just like always, their daughter cuts right through the tension.

Felicity's shoulders relax and she pokes Oliver in the chest, mumbling, "You're lucky I love you."

The truth of that is absolutely undeniable. He's well aware of precisely how lucky he is.

She moves to go to Ellie but Oliver grabs her hand, tugging her close enough to give her a quick kiss. It's chaste, but it's everything, because he *can* do it, because she's right here. She's okay. Her hand lands on his chest, her fingers curling into the collar of his shirt.

When they pull apart, he gives her a soft, "Love you," that's for her ears only, and it makes her smile.

"Look, Momma!"

"I'm coming," Felicity says, turning to their daughter. She wraps her arm around her, looking at the finished product. Her eyes go wide. "You did such a good job, Ellie-bug!"

"Thank you!"

"You and Raisa make an amazing team," she adds, holding up her hand for a high-five. Ellie slaps their palms together and then it's Raisa's turn, who taps her hand gently. It'd become an accidental thing one night, when Ellie had helped Raisa with dinner. Now when one

person gets a high-five, everyone gets a high-five.

"Can I help you cut the strawberries?" Ellie asks.

"How about you watch me cut the strawberries," she suggests as Raisa places the whipped cream in the fridge to chill. Felicity glances back at Oliver, who's still watching them, barely making any headway on the actual waffles. "But you know what, Ellie-bug, I think your Daddy needs some help over there."

Oliver chuckles, shaking his head at her. "How many am I making? Who wants waffles?"

"I have never in my life said no to the Queen family waffles and I'm not about to start now," Sara supplies, smiling from behind her coffee cup.

"I'll pass. Johnny can have my share," Lyla says, tilting her head toward him. "I'm going to have some of that lasagna from last night. Pregnancy leads to strange breakfast choices."

"Okay," Oliver agrees. "Mom? Are you sticking around for breakfast?"

"I have time before my meeting for a waffle or two," Moira agrees. "Provided you managed to get all of the eggshell out of the batter, that is."

"Thanks, Mom," Oliver huffs, with a bemused twist of his lips. "No crunchy waffles. I promise."

"Ellie, why don't you go make sure there's no eggshell bits in the batter and I'll get the strawberries cut?" Felicity asks.

"That sounds like a good plan, Momma," Ellie agrees. Felicity picks her up, moving her over to where Oliver gets back to mixing. Before she can set her down though, he wraps his arm around both of them, tugging them into his chest, giving them both a messy kiss.

The sound of both of their happy giggles fills the kitchen and Oliver's heart. This right here is what he wants. Forever. And it's why, just after breakfast, he's got somewhere else he needs to be. Having moments like this is simple, but keeping it safe, keeping *them* safe… well that's going to take a bit more effort.

A steady drip of water and the soft rumble of engines a floor below are the only sounds for a steady ten minutes. It's a concentrated effort to keep himself from bouncing in place, to keep still; it's a sharp contrast to what he'd been like a few short weeks ago. He used to be able to stand unmoving for hours on end, waiting, but now it's driving him up the wall.

The amount of time he's spent away from his family over the last two weeks has been minimal, if that. It hadn't just been that he didn't want to be away from them - the bubble of pure joy he'd been living in was absolutely like a drug - but it'd also been that they'd all held in a seemingly unending 'wait for something to happen' mode. For once, it had been easier to make sure they were well-protected defensively rather than actively find something to fight, especially when it came to Zoom. They'd only just recently found out time travel was a possibility, and on top of that that an attack could come from anywhere, at any time. It's not exactly something you can actively seek out for a fight.

But that remaining their sole focus could only last so long. It had been inevitable, really, that the situation with Isabel and Blood would demand they take a more active role. They'd all been aware of it, known it was coming…

Still, Oliver feels like he's left half of his body back at the Manor, like he's ghosted through Starling City, even more out of his element than usual. It always feels wrong somehow to be in his Arrow suit in daylight hours, but that's doubly true today and there's no avoiding it.

They're running out of time. The election is just days away and without a firm link proving Blood and Isabel are in collusion, the mayor's seat is still a tight race. There's no way they can allow Blood to win. It's not even an option at this point. They might not know precisely what had been up Slade's sleeve - that picture remains as fuzzy as ever, and so far no amount of interrogation had gotten a single sound out of him, according to Lyla - but there's no doubt that Isabel ruling QC while Blood runs the city had absolutely been a part of whatever plans he'd had.

So he needs proof. He needs it *now*, and the few avenues they have open to them are dwindling fast the longer Isabel's in control of his

family's company.

Growing up, Oliver had paid no attention to the board of Queen Consolidated. They'd been boring at best and a rival for his father's attention at worst. Now, he understands the way they work a little better. If anyone's in a position to give away whatever Isabel's plans for the company are, it's the board. And if there's anything that will link her to Blood, that will clarify what plans the two of them have, it's going to be how she's using QC. He can't confront Isabel directly, as Oliver Queen *or* as The Arrow, but the board… The board is another story.

Of the current board members, there are two Oliver knows have no loyalty whatsoever to Isabel Rochev. While they might not have stuck their necks out for him, he's also fairly confident they're not going to lift a finger for her. Edgar Robinson and William Worthington aren't what Oliver would call allies, but they're not opponents either and these days he'll take whatever he can get.

The last minute board meeting at QC is something Oliver only knows about because Thea's signature had let them retain their assets - including a sizable number of shares in the company. He might be ousted as the CEO, but he still has stock and that gives him information and influence he might not have had otherwise. So, he's unfailingly grateful to his absentee sister for that, even if it's painful to think about her right now.

For the umpteenth time, he wonders where she's at, if she'll ever forgive any of them.

Wallowing in that isn't a luxury he has right now, though. Not while he lays in wait in the QC parking garage, watching for either Edgar or William to show up. There's not room for anything else in his head. Not Thea. Not Felicity. Not even Ellie. Right now, he's The Arrow, not Oliver Queen. And maybe if he does it well enough he'll get to go back to being Oliver in the very, *very* near future.

That idea alone is enough to set him on his path with solid focus.

"*Oliver, heads up. There's a limo headed in now*."

Lyla's voice rings through his earpiece and even though Oliver knows full well that she's the one on the other side of the line, the sound of her on the comm instead of Felicity throws him a little. But this isn't what anyone would call a high risk mission and Felicity's occupied with Ellie at the moment, which is exactly where she should be.

"Copy," Oliver replies, adjusting his position slightly to gain a better vantage point from the shadows as a car rolls into the garage.

It's Worthington's. Oliver knows that immediately because the man is self-absorbed enough to have vanity plates on his *limo*. William Worthington is a grade-A snob. He comes from old money and is one of the longest-standing members of the board. That's precisely what makes him useful in this instance. There is nothing at all about Isabel that the man finds worthy of running a company he's had a longstanding part of. She's young, she's brash, and she's female, all of which stand as points against her in Worthington's book. And while some of that makes Oliver dislike the man a little more, it also makes him a weak link, one The Arrow is more than happy to exploit.

The limo rolls to a stop right near the elevator door and Oliver tenses for confrontation, but for several long minutes no one emerges from the car. It's easier to concentrate on the waiting, knowing his target is right there… but as the minutes pass by, he feels that same antsy feeling from earlier taking over again.

Oliver's a patient man - something he learned from the island, certainly, because he absolutely wasn't prior to that - but he's starting to think about abandoning the cover of a cement pillar in favor of approaching the car door when the door finally opens.

Worthington steps out, still talking to someone else inside the limo.

Shit.

He hadn't expected anyone else there, besides the man's driver of course, but he also doesn't have the time to rework his plans. Their window of opportunity is shrinking and there aren't many alternatives.

"William Worthington," he pronounces, voice gritty and distorted by his modulator as he steps from behind the pillar, his bow in his hand but unraised.

The man jumps, turning on a dime, eyes widening as he stumbles back a step.

"I'm not here to hurt you," Oliver promises, raising his free hand in reassurance. "I need information and I'm told you're the man to talk to."

The man is pale as a sheet. It wasn't too long ago that he very much fit the profile of the sort of man Oliver was putting arrows in.

"I-I can't help you," the man insists in a nervous rush of breath, backing toward the still-open car door.

"You can," Oliver tells him definitively. "I have some questions about Isabel Rochev and her association with a certain mayoral candidate. You and I have quite a bit in common when it comes to our positions on Ms. Rochev. I believe she's aligned herself with Sebastian Blood in ways that will jeopardize this city. I need you to help me prove it."

The man pauses at that, eyes darting back toward the limo in a way that makes Oliver's stomach sink. What if he's changed? What if it's *Isabel* in the car? What if he's misjudged the senior board member?

"Well…" Worthington says with a heavy gulp. "You aren't the only one to think so."

Oliver bites back his, '*What the hell does that mean?'* His mind is already racing ahead, his fingers itching to raise the bow - he doesn't have *time* for this - but then the door on the other side of the limo unlatches, followed by the distinctive click of high heels against the pavement as someone steps out.

His blood runs cold when the familiar figure emerges, standing fully next to the car with a displeased look and raised eyebrow.

What. The. *Hell.*

"While I appreciate your position and rather unorthodox support, I'd say your approach leaves something to be desired."

It takes absolutely everything Oliver has to keep himself from saying, '*Mom.'*

Oliver clenches his jaw as Moira Queen rounds the car, glaring at her son with obvious irritation. She lays a hand on Worthington's arm, her chin raised high and her posture perfect as she turns to address him, simultaneously dismissing Oliver while giving the air of complete confidence that The Arrow won't hurt either of them.

It's only because of that that Oliver doesn't tell her to go. As his heart starts pumping again, sending a rush of pure aggravation-fueled adrenaline through his veins instead of blood, he realizes he and his mother need to have a talk. About boundaries. All of her talk about being safe, and this is what she's doing?

"Bill, you and I both know exactly what's going on here," Moira says.

"Despite some of my more… *unseemly* supporters…" She glances darkly at The Arrow before shifting her gaze back to Worthington. "The best thing for this city *and* this company is for Isabel Rochev to be shown the door. Her ways of doing things are brash, crude, and entirely unbefitting of a company like Queen Consolidated or a city like Starling."

Worthington shifts uncomfortably, unable to keep his eyes off of Oliver.

"She's a young upstart," he agrees, almost tentatively. He stares at Oliver, waiting for him to make a move, but when he doesn't, it seems to placate him slightly. After another moment, he swallows, and then he finally glances at Moira. Oliver's careful to keep himself perfectly still, knowing any movement will have the man scurrying before he can talk. "I've never liked her. She was a distraction at best and undermining at worst. I have no love for that woman, but I don't know how much help I can be, Moira. You have my vote, both on the board and at the polls, but I'm not sure what else I can do."

"And I appreciate your support in both arenas, Bill," Moira assures him. "What I need from you is to be my eyes and ears inside that boardroom… Which is, I suspect, the same thing The Arrow had been about to ask of you, if I'm not mistaken."

They both look at him, prompting Oliver to nod sharply. His mother looks pleased, as if she'd orchestrated this entire thing from the beginning, and that sends yet another wave of aggravation through him. It also makes him feel like a small child playing dress-up in front of his mother's scrutiny, more than he could have ever imagined possible while wearing his Arrow suit.

Oliver grits his teeth, clearing his throat.

"Rochev and Blood have been working with a known terrorist," Oliver supplies, trying to regain some footing in this situation. "I've seen proof, but I don't have anything I can get them arrested on. And, worse yet, I don't know their end game. I just know that we can't let them achieve it."

Worthington's confidence is slowly working its way back. He nods at Oliver before looking back to Moira, his expression far more resolved than Oliver had dared hope for. He knows without having to outright acknowledge it that it's their combined efforts that has this going so smoothly.

"Neither Isabel nor Blood have what it takes to lead," Worthington declares. "She's gotten where she is by stabbing people in the back and - pardon my saying this, Moira - spreading her legs for the right people." Oliver winces before he can stop himself - neither of them seem to notice though. "She has no idea how to cultivate the sort of relationships one needs to last in this business and I don't want to see her take QC down when it all catches up to her. And Blood… well, his breeding says it all, doesn't it? The pulled-themselves-up-by-the-bootstraps type always think rising up from the rubble means they're our equals, but you and I know better."

"Does that mean you'll help?" Moira asks.

"If you need eyes in the room…" Worthington nods, looking from her to The Arrow and back. "I owe your family a lot, Moira. I refuse to sit idly by and watch QC fall because of some bitter, power-hungry little girl with a grudge. I'll pass along whatever I find out."

"We appreciate that," Oliver says - it comes out in more of a grumble as he pulls his hood low to better obscure his face. His mother shoots him a disbelieving look, probably more due to his wording than anything else.

"Fighting to save the city doesn't always mean putting arrows in people," Worthington tells him. "Sometimes it means quietly lending support to the right people."

It's a subtle rebuke of his methods as well as an emphasis on his desire that his involvement be kept secret. Oliver knows this and it really went without saying, but he nods back at the man all the same.

"We all have our parts to play," Oliver agrees.

"Bill," Moira says, leaning up to kiss the man on his weathered cheek, "you really must come by the Manor when this is all over. It's been entirely too long."

"Just as soon as you're mayor," he tells her. "I have to say, it's been good to see your son bearing more responsibility of late." Oliver nearly bites the tip of his tongue off. "As messy as it is that he's involved with his former secretary, your people did a beautiful job side-stepping that issue and making him look the part of a family man. This has always been a family company. It ought to have stayed that way. And with your boy looking more fit to lead, we might just end up with the Queens running this city after all."

"One battle at a time," Moira demures, smiling thinly like this isn't something she's been thinking of extensively already. Oliver knows better. Truth be told, running Queen Consolidated was never really something he wanted to do, but Worthington isn't exactly wrong, either. QC is a family company and it should get back to that. Still, he wonders if maybe he isn't the person in his family who should be at the helm.

"Yes," Worthington says, "well, clearly there are-"

"*Oliver, you have company!"*

Lyla's voice echoes in his ear just as a loud crash of crumbling concrete punctuates Worthington's words, cutting him off.

In an instant, Oliver forgets his mother is even there as he spins towards the sound - instinct takes over, everything he learned on that damned island coming to the surface in a heartbeat. All he knows is there's a threat and his response is borne entirely of years dedicated to survival. His bow's already raised, his body poised to fight without even requiring conscious thought on the matter. His muscles coil and his senses hone in on the unknown element.

"*Just one*," Lyla supplies. "*But there's a blind spot on the cameras at your six."*

He scarcely glances sideways to check the blind spot she's talking about to find it unoccupied because across the parking garage a support pillar crumbles to dust. The ceiling above groans at the sudden lack of support, the debris settling in heavy waves, revealing a hulking shadow standing next to it.

Oliver doesn't recognize the man, he's too far away… but that doesn't matter because he's already moving. Before Oliver can tell him to stop, the man squats down to lift a *car* with his bare hands. His focus is fully set on the three of them as he throws the sedan to the side like it's absolutely nothing. As the sound of metal screeching against metal echoes through the garage, anticipation and fear fills Oliver.

He'd recognize the effects of mirakuru anywhere.

It's not Slade, he knows that with one hundred percent certainty, which means…

She's made more.

But how? And what the hell is he doing here, of all places?

When the realization smacks him in the face, he growls a string of obscenities under his breath.

Of course.

"What is…" his mother starts, terror and uncertainty evident in her voice.

Oh, *that's* a vivid reminder of her presence. This isn't just a fight. This is a battle to protect his mother, to shield his newfound source, to save his one-time employees upstairs from the wrath of an uncontrolled mirakuru-infected man with unbridled rage who's clearly searching for a target.

"Get her to the boardroom," Oliver snaps at Worthington, taking a few steps forward so he's well between his mother and the looming threat. "Lock the doors and call 911."

"That is *not* an option," Moira counters. "If I'm there, it won't take Isabel long to figure out why and then Bill will be shut out of the company entirely. We'll lose the one resource we have here."

"We lose a lot more if you're dead," Oliver tells her pointedly, not glancing back.

"She's right," Worthington pitches in, and his haughty voice grates on Oliver's nerves. He's obviously taking after his mother and the way she's addressing The Arrow as he says, "I need to warn the board. You'll have to keep her safe."

"Go," Moira agrees before Oliver can say anything.

The echo of only one set of too-fast footsteps follows an instant later and the chime of the elevator sounds as the man scurries away.

"Get in the limo," Oliver orders, loosing two arrows in quick succession at the super-serum-powered adversary. Both of them hit; neither of them do much. He's entirely abandoned the voice modulator at this point, glancing back at his mother who is watching him with newly appraising, worried eyes. "*Mom*, get in!"

"You too," she tells him, earning an incredulous look that she absolutely should have expected. "Oliver, we need to go. This isn't a fight you're prepared for." That needles the absolute *hell* out of him.

"You don't even have backup."

"*John and Sara are fifteen minutes out*," Lyla's voice echoes in his ear. "*I've got the girls. We're headed for the lair.*"

There's no comfort to be found in Lyla's words. Fifteen minutes is an eternity in a fight, but he doesn't tell her that. There's no need. She already knows. Instead, he addresses his mother.

"How many employees are upstairs?" Oliver asks her, letting another arrow fly free and watching as the man grunts and pulls it out of his midsection like it's no more of a bother than a particularly nasty splinter. "He'll kill us because we're in his way, but he's not here for us. He's here for *them*. Or did you really think Isabel calling an emergency board meeting and a mirakuru-infected soldier attacking QC at the same time was a coincidence?

"She's trying to take out the board so she can paint herself the company's savior and put her own people in place," Oliver follows up insistently.

Moira completely ignores him, closing the distance between them. "This isn't just about you and your mission, Oliver. Your arrows are barely touching him. You have a family now. If he's anything like Slade Wilson, you need to get in that limo *now*. Think of your family, Oliver."

"I *am* thinking about my family!" he snaps back, nearly turning to her, nearly letting her actually distract him for a fraction of a second. It only serves as a vivid reminder that there's an excellent reason that secret identities are meant to stay secret. "That includes you. So, damn it, Mom, *get in the car*!"

But it's too late for that. The limo's driver seems to have finally caught on to what's happening and speeds away, tires screeching as he peels out of the garage.

"Oh…" Moira says, her fingers digging into Oliver's sleeve.

He absently wonders if she's aware of it as he realizes he's the only thing standing between a madman and his mother. The only thing standing between a rage-fueled, crazed man and a building full of his former employees.

"*They're eleven minutes out, Oliver*," Lyla says in his ear.

It's too long, too much damage can be done, too many lives at risk to let this man run rampant. Still, he hesitates, because he knows what he's facing. For the first time ever, he hesitates… because it's not just him anymore, it's not just his life at risk. It's *so much more*.

Acid floods his veins.

Moira grips his sleeve, tugging slightly. "Oliver…"

He *hates* hearing that note of terror in his mother's voice, and it speaks to something deep inside him, something intrinsically tied to who he is at his core.

It's exactly what he needs.

"Stay back and find cover," Oliver orders simply.

And then he launches himself at the other man.

Sometimes it's a lot simpler than saving a whole city.

Sometimes it's about saving one person in it.

Chapter 22

"Why is this so much easier when it's *my* hair? You'd think… you'd think it wouldn't be this difficult because I know how it works… at least where the pieces go. I've done it so many times, and yet…"

Felicity bites the tip of her tongue, tilting her head in concentration as she tries to get her fingers to move the correct way, but it's as if they've forgotten how to move at all. Mumbling under her breath, she twists her wrist, trying to get her fingers to follow, but it's useless. They stall out.

"Damn it," she mutters.

"Momma, that's a bad word," Ellie says, not looking up from where she's sitting between Felicity's legs on the floor, tugging on her doll's hair, imitating her mother's movements.

"Sorry," Felicity replies absently. She starts releasing the braids, running her fingers through Ellie's long strands. Her hair's still a little damp from her bath and Felicity is careful to make sure her nails don't get too tangled in Ellie's curls. "We're going to conquer this French braid, Ellie-bug."

"Okay!" Ellie says, bouncing. "I like when our hair matches."

"Me too, baby," Felicity says, before finishing on a whisper, "I'm going to get this. Even if it kills me. Which it probably will."

She and Oliver had been sprawled out on the sofa the night before, talking in whispered code about the plan he's executing this very moment. It'd been simple enough: get in, talk to Robinson or Worthington, get out. It was going to be their first planned mission since Ellie had arrived, and the more they'd talked about it, the more the nerves slowly growing in her chest had started to spiral out. Felicity hadn't realized she'd started braiding the ends of her hair - mostly to keep her fingers from picking a hole in the sofa as they'd talked about contingency plans - until Ellie had popped up from her spot on the floor with bright eyes.

"*Momma, braid mine, braid mine! But do mine like the French!"*

And so here they were, Felicity silently yelling at the neural pathways in her brain that let her French braid her own hair perfectly, but

apparently short out when she tries to style one on someone else. The mere thought of twining Ellie's curly locks turns her fingers into useless sausages, bumping and twisting around in confusion.

Felicity's dividing Ellie's hair into sections again when she hears the muffled sound of high heels on carpet making their way toward their room, quickly followed by an "*Oh my, you're new*" as her mother approaches. Felicity stifles a snort of laughter, knowing her mother's seeing Ryan, the new bodyguard currently standing post outside their door. She really can't fault her mom; he is very nice to look at. That realization only makes her grin more as a memory surfaces - she'd mentioned that very thing to Sara yesterday, after the introductions, and Oliver had been right behind her. The sight of his eyes not-so-surreptitiously checking Ryan out from head to toe with a narrowed gaze and tight jaw had made them both laugh.

Ellie instantly sits taller, excitement making her jittery as she hears her grandmother.

"I haven't seen you before," Donna says. "You're so… It'd be hard to miss you." Her mother lets out a breathy little chuckle and Felicity perfectly imagines her mother cocking her head, twirling her hair with that huge smile of hers. "Hi, I'm Donna. I'm Felicity's mom."

Felicity can hear the restrained amusement in Ryan's voice as he responds with, "I know, ma'am."

"Right. Of course. Of course you know, you're here for safety. Our safety. I like being safe. With all that… uh. So, are they… in there? My daughter. And my granddaughter. My girls. There's… Oh, hi, Lyla."

Lyla's faint voice from the room across from theirs sounds, "Hi, Donna. The girls are in their room."

Ryan might be the one officially standing guard, but Felicity's well aware that Lyla isn't going to be more than a room away from them at any given time. She's taking their safety every bit as seriously as Digg or Sara or Oliver himself and, though Felicity can't say she knows Lyla all that well at this point, she's quickly finding that she both respects and admires the ARGUS agent. Especially considering she's not only watching over them, but helping Oliver on the comms as well, handling both with a confidence that keeps Felicity at ease.

Felicity leans over, whispering into Ellie's ear, "Why don't you go rescue your grandma from herself?"

"Gramma!" Ellie instantly shouts, launching off the floor. Felicity leans back against the foot of the bed, watching her daughter run to the door and tug it open where it's cracked slightly. "We're right here!"

"Oh there you are, baby girl!" Donna says just as she saunters into the room. She's wearing a pair of jeans that hide her platform heels. Jeans, her mother's started wearing *jeans*. They only emphasize the rest of her casual attire as she leans down to pick Ellie up - a bright pink sweatshirt with sparkly writing that hangs off one shoulder like she might be auditioning for a part in Flashdance. The little girl greets her with an enthusiastic grin, wrapping her arms around Donna's neck as she swoops down to hold her.

"Momma's braiding my hair, Gramma, look!" Ellie leans her head forward to show the complete lack of braids in her hair and a small flush of shame skates over Felicity's cheeks. "Isn't it pretty?"

Donna's eyebrows go up in confusion, her eyes finding Felicity's.

"I'm trying to give her a French braid," Felicity explains. "Although apparently I only know how to do my own French braids. Which sounds ridiculous because the concept is there, but I can't…" She waves her hands in the air, missing the look that crosses Donna's face. "Make these things work."

"You asked me to come up here to show you how to braid her hair?"

"Yes, because I'm a visual learner, and watching you do your own in the mirror was one thing, but doing this…" Felicity pauses when she sees Donna biting her lip, her eyes… watering. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Donna says, shaking her head. She sets Ellie down with care before easing down onto the floor next to Felicity. Ellie wastes no time, settling between Donna's legs in the same exact position she'd been in with Felicity, as if they do this all the time. Donna's smile is still watery as she runs her fingers through her granddaughter's long wavy strands before looking back at Felicity. "It's just… you're asking me for advice."

"Well, you're the one who taught me," Felicity replies slowly. "I figured I'd go to the source."

"It's just weird, is all… Nice," Donna says as she pulls Ellie's hair back, untangling some parts with the practiced ease of a mother. Felicity watches her hands, a small smile growing on her face, remembering very well the feel of her mother's fingers running through her hair, her

nails scraping her scalp. It'd been oddly comforting, and it'd always left her feeling safe. Does she do that for Ellie? "I'd always imagined being there when you had a baby," her mother continues. "Helping you, teaching you my little tricks. I have some pretty good tricks, too. You sorta skipped that part though."

"Oliver and I talk about that a lot," Felicity admits without thinking, leaning back against the bed. Her arm brushes Donna's and Felicity leans into her, her head tilting towards her mother as if to lay on her shoulder. "We're doing this a bit backwards. We're doing a lot of this backwards."

Donna nods with a little hum, not adding anything else, giving her space to think and speak when she's ready. For all of her mother's tendency to make herself the center of attention, she's also always done this - known when to be silent and wait for her daughter to process and speak her mind. From the outside, it might seem contradictory, but that's Donna Smoak. One moment she seems like someone trying a little too hard to be a Vegas showgirl a few decades late in life, the next she's a surprisingly perceptive mom and grandmother.

From the second she'd met Ellie, Donna had announced that she was staying, for as long as Ellie was there. And hadn't *that* been a chilling conversation, her mother asking what they were going to do if Ellie had to go back - rather, *when* Ellie had to go back. Felicity had been doing a pretty good job of not thinking about, keeping it firmly in the 'deal with it when it happens' column, until she'd seen the way Donna's face had fallen as she'd looked at Ellie.

And then Felicity remembers Ellie talking to her stomach that morning, and then Oliver. With a shiver, her eyes flutter shut for a moment, feeling his hands on her legs, his fingers brushing her stomach, his eyes on her as he'd whispered to her belly.

God, she wants it, she wants it so bad.

"We still have that to look forward to," Felicity says, pulling herself back to the present. "Unless Oliver suddenly changes his mind-"

"He won't," Donna says, stopping her. Felicity moves to tell her she knows, but Donna isn't done. "I've never seen anyone look at another person the way he looks at you, baby. That man loves you."

Felicity presses her lips together as a huge smile threatens to take over. She ducks her head, her mind slipping back to when he'd left for

the foundry. They'd been downstairs, Ellie wandering around them as they'd hugged. When Felicity had tried to pull back, saying, "*Hurry up or I'll be taking that shower by myself,"* he'd only held her tighter, digging his face into her neck.

"*I'll just drag you back in there,"* Oliver had whispered back, making her chuckle, in part because of his words and partly because he hadn't shaved in a few days - his beard was longer, tickling her neck.

And then he'd pulled back, but just enough to look at her, to smile. Thinking back on it, Felicity feels light as a feather realizing his eyes had warmed so much over the last few weeks; the shadows were slowly disappearing, edging back, like he was letting light into a dusty room he'd never opened before. He was *happy*. With her. He'd given her a soft, lingering kiss, one that simultaneously grounded her in their happiness and ignited that familiar burn in the pit of her stomach.

"*I love you."*

"And oh, the way he melts around you and Ellie," Donna continues with a smile, shaking her head in wonder. She pats Felicity's leg. "He's not going anywhere. Trust me."

"I know," Felicity replies, nodding. And she does. She *feels* it. Donna reaches over, grasping Felicity's chin, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Felicity lets out a breathy laugh, leaning into her, feeling a sense of peace having two of the most important women in her life right there with her.

"Well then," Donna says, sitting up straighter. She tugs on Ellie's hair gently, getting her attention. "Shall we finish getting this beautiful long hair braided?"

"Yes!" Ellie replies and holds up her doll. "And then we can do my baby doll's! Daddy said we maybe can go swimming today."

"That's exciting," Donna says. "You're such a good swimmer, little one."

Ellie nods. "Momma said that it's important that Daddy knows I can swim, so I make sure I swim really good."

A surge of emotion springs up in the center of her chest and Felicity rubs the spot, automatically correcting her with, "Well. Swim really well."

"I don't go swimming in wells, Momma. They're too small."

Donna laughs at that, and not for the first time, Felicity shakes her head in wonder - her child has a brain like a sponge. What *doesn't* she know? That naturally leads her down the path of wondering what she's accidentally said over the last few weeks that Ellie's gleaned. She sends yet another silent, '*Oops, my bad,'* to her future self.

"Alright, let's start on this side," Donna says, leaning over, starting to part Ellie's hair when Lyla's sharp voice suddenly rings out from across the hall.

"Oliver, you have company!"

Felicity's insides slam to the floor. For a split second, she freezes, her body simultaneously realizing that she's not in a position to do anything while still aching to reach for her keyboard, every inch of her feeling the same need to put eyes on him to make sure he's okay. She'd fought the idea when he'd first suggested Lyla taking over comms, wanting to keep an eye on him herself, but Ellie had been right there, asking what they were going to do while Daddy was gone, and her role in the day's events had become blindingly clear.

"Just one," Lyla continues. Her voice is strict, but there isn't any fear or worry there. It's more informative, and considering all Oliver's supposed to be doing is talking to a board member, he should be *fine*. Totally *fine*. Like the-intruder-could-just-be-a-security-guard *fine*. "But there's a blind spot on the cameras at your six."

"What was that?" Donna asks, looking up from her work.

"Nothing," Felicity says, giving her mother a smile that hopefully doesn't look as fake as it feels. God, she hopes it's nothing. "Just Arrow stuff." And it won't ever not be weird using those words when talking to Donna. Despite her forced calm demeanor, every bit of her attention is in the other room as she reaches out, blindly tugging on a piece of Ellie's hair. "Show me?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Felicity answers, nodding, but Donna isn't done.

"Do you want…?"

"Oh, shit," Lyla gasps.

Before she can string two words together, Felicity's already up and moving, barely getting a "Watch her," out over her shoulder before she's running past Ryan and into the open door across the hall.

"John, Sara, you're needed at QC *now*," Lyla barks into her phone. Her voice is oddly muted - she's very aware of her surroundings, but the command she exudes makes it sound like a shout, the demand for them to act *now* incredibly clear. "You're about fifteen minutes out taking Clarkson. *Move*."

A soft, "On our way," sounds on the other side as Lyla switches back to Oliver.

"What is it, what's happening?" Felicity demands, but Lyla throws a hand up to silence her, pressing the comm in her ear closer, eyes intent on the tablet on her lap. Felicity doesn't have to be next to her to see the clouds of debris and hear what sounds like shouts on the other end of Oliver's comm. She rushes to Lyla's side, heart in her throat, her eyes glued to the screen, *needing* to see Oliver, to make sure he's okay. "What-"

"John and Sara are fifteen minutes out," Lyla says into the comm, ignoring her. "I've got the girls."

"You what?" Felicity asks. "What's going on, what are you doing with the girls?"

Something's wrong, something's wrong enough that she's sending Diggle and Sara to help him, which means… what? Felicity doesn't know and she *hates* not knowing. Is he hurt?

Oh god, *Ellie*. The next surge of frantic alarm is even worse, and suddenly she's back in the kitchen, back to watching Slade choking the life out of Oliver right before her, watching - no, *feeling* - her daughter disappearing right in her arms.

"Ellie!" Felicity yells, moving to run back into their room when Donna instantly replies with, "I still have her, Felicity, what…?"

Relief rushes through her, and Felicity shakes her head at herself, a hard, '*No!'* echoing through her head. She needs to get a grip. Now is so not the time to completely lose it.

"We're headed for the lair," Lyla finishes, drowning out Donna's reply. She clicks off the comm, finally looking up at Felicity. "We have a problem."

"I-I can see that…"

Felicity moves to grab the tablet, the need to see what's going on and make sure Oliver's okay damn near blinding her, but Lyla stands, cutting her off again with a quick, "We have to go." She tucks the tablet under her arm, ushering Felicity out of the room. "Now."

"Oliver…"

Even she can hear the odd tremble in her voice. A tiny niggle of hysteria digs into the pit of her stomach and it has panic rising up, making her chest tighten and her arms tingle. What is *wrong* with her, why is she freaking out like this? How many times have they done this? Dozens. Probably even more. She's watched Oliver do near-impossible things, survive circumstances that he couldn't possibly have, and she's been in enough hairy situations herself…

But all of a sudden the thought of losing Oliver, of losing Ellie… it's a thousand times more crippling than before. Felicity pinches her lips together as hard as she can, digging her teeth into the tender flesh. She can't lose it now; she absolutely cannot.

Still… she suddenly knows with a certainty she's never felt before that she needs to know, she needs that reassurance like she needs air.

"Lyla," she asks, grabbing her hand. "Is he alright?"

"He's okay," Lyla replies, glancing back over her shoulder. She pauses when she sees whatever's staring back at her and she turns abruptly, grabbing Felicity's elbow. "He's *fine*, Felicity. Okay?"

"Okay. Good. Good, okay." Felicity nods, squeezing her eyes shut for a second before forcing them open again. "So what…?"

"I'll tell you on the way, okay?"

"Okay. Lair… Why are we going to the lair?"

"It's more secure and we're going to meet them there," Lyla replies. "You good?"

"Yeah. I'm good." Felicity nods. Takes a deep breath. Nods again. "Let's go."

The second she hits the hallway and sees her mother holding Ellie, her eyes wide with worry where she's still standing in their bedroom, the

panic instantly dissipates. It's *gone* the second Ellie looks at her, her doll crushed to her chest as she chews on her bottom lip. It's not just her. And if everyone is rushing to the lair, then it's bad. Like a switch going off in her head, she stands up taller, taking a deep breath, her chest instantly loosening.

Get Ellie to safety is her first thought. Her second thought is about Oliver, but she shoves it down, and her third thought is about her mother. If they're leaving the house, she's definitely not staying behind.

"What's going on?" Donna asks. "Is everything okay?"

Felicity steps up, taking Ellie. "It's fine." She really, really hopes she's speaking the truth, though whenever her mind slips to the urgency in Lyla's voice and the glimpse she'd caught on the tablet, her stomach swoops. She forces herself away from it. "We have to go meet Oliver."

Like those are the magic words Ellie's been waiting for, she instantly relaxes in Felicity's arms, her eyes brightening. "We're going to see Daddy?"

"Yeah, sweetie, we're going to see Daddy." Felicity turns back to Donna. "Mom, I need you to go to my apartment."

"What? Why?"

"I can't really explain right now, but I just need you to, okay? Just to be safe."

"Safe from what?"

"Ryan," Lyla interrupts, nodding to the older woman. "Will you escort her there and stay with her?"

"Of course," the bodyguard responds. He turns to Donna, but the dazzle from earlier is gone. She only has eyes for her daughter.

"Felicity, what's going on? Is everything alright?"

"Honestly, Mom, I don't know, okay?" Felicity replies with a sharpness she hadn't intended. When Donna's brow furrows, Felicity lets out a heavy exhale. "I'm sorry. I just need to know you're safe. And that means not being here because… because we just don't know enough right now. Please go with Ryan."

"Do you want me to take Ellie?" Donna asks. "She can come with me while you go meet Oliver."

She takes a step towards them, and Felicity instantly grips Ellie tighter, realizing only then that she's had a death grip on her daughter. The deja vu is almost too much and she feels the panic starting to rise up again. She can't believe how viscerally she's reacting, she'd honestly thought it'd be Oliver she'd have to talk down when he got back, but nope, it was her. Her and her freaky mind freaking her right out.

You can do this.

She just has to get to Oliver, make sure he's okay.

Make sure Ellie doesn't disappear again.

The sudden need to hear his voice almost supersedes everything before she shakes herself out of it again.

Get a grip.

It also really doesn't help that they hadn't explained the full scope of the danger Ellie's in to Donna - from Zoom, from his supposed ability to rip holes through time. She trusts her mother with their lives, absolutely, but what if this is the moment Zoom is waiting for? What if he can see more than they thought, and he will know the exact moment of when and where to strike?

She shivers, holding Ellie tighter.

Not again.

"No," Felicity says, almost obstinate as she shakes her head. "She's okay. With me. I need her to… to stay with me. We just need to get to Oliver."

"Honey, you're scaring me," Donna says, closing the distance between them. "You're pale and you're breathing too fast. Let me come with you."

Lyla glances at the screen again. A swipe of her finger brings up a different angle on the cameras she's looking through. Felicity doesn't miss her wince. She glances at her watch before saying into the comm, "They're eleven minutes out, Oliver."

It yanks Felicity back to reality.

"Mom, I'm okay, I promise." Felicity gives her a half-hearted hug before turning to go with Lyla. "Go with Ryan to my apartment. My keys are in the bedroom, on the desk."

"Felicity…"

"I'll call you," Felicity says over her shoulder, and then she hikes Ellie closer and takes off with Lyla. She barely remembers going down the stairs, barely remembers Lyla guiding her to the front where her car is parked outside.

What she does remember is buckling Ellie in and the large backseat dwarfing her, making her look incredibly tiny. Felicity curses under her breath, thinking of the car seat sitting in garage, but there's no time. As she tugs the seat belt over Ellie's head, her daughter looks up at her, and the look on her face sends a chill down Felicity's spine.

"Momma, should I hide again? Is…" Her voice lowers, her eyes widening as she shrinks into herself a little. "Is the bad man here?"

"Oh, Ellie…" That only reminds her of Slade *again,* even though she knows she's talking about Zoom. It suddenly hits her that the bubble they've been living in for the last few weeks has burst. "No, baby," Felicity replies, shaking her head, crouching down so they're eye-level. "The bad man's not here, okay? We're going to see Daddy."

Ellie's voice is quiet. "Is he okay?"

"He's okay." The toddler looks unconvinced, her eyes darting to Lyla, more than sensing the tension in both women. Her lower lip starts to tremble and that slices through Felicity's heart. She cups her little cheek. "Hey, sweetie, it's alright. We're gonna go see him, so we can see for ourselves, okay?" Ellie nods slowly, her eyes filling with tears. Before Felicity knows what she's doing, she's reaching in and unbuckling Ellie, urging her over. "Here, I'm gonna sit back here with you."

"Okay," Ellie sniffles, scooting over as Felicity climbs into the backseat with her.

As soon as she has Ellie buckled in again, yanking the belt over her head so it doesn't press right against her neck, Felicity buckles herself in. As if that was the only cue Lyla was waiting for, she shifts the car into gear and they're off, whipping out from under the porte-cochère.

"Can I put my Rascal band-aids on Daddy's owies again?" Ellie asks.

"What?" Felicity asks, barely whipping her hand out long enough to hold Ellie in place as Lyla takes a sharp turn. "Band-aids?"

"The last time Daddy got hurt, he let me put Rascal on them. He said it made him feel better." When Ellie catches the confusion on her face - and really, it's mostly because Felicity feels like she's been shot into a limbo where there's nothing but twisting and turning, and the only thing that will make it better is seeing Oliver - she continues, rubbing her tiny bicep. "He hurt his arm, 'member? He got owies all over his arm."

She's thinking of the future, Felicity realizes. All things considered, Ellie's done a remarkable job keeping the timelines separate in her mind - *far* better than she is, and Oliver, if their late-night conversations are anything to go by. Right now though, she's asking her about something that hasn't happened yet, and the fact that she's reverting back to times when she felt safe, when she felt in control - even if it was just doing her own bandages on her father's wounds - twists Felicity's insides.

"I think he'd love that, Ellie-bug," Felicity replies, her hand still on her chest, still keeping her in place. She gives her a reassuring squeeze and both that and her words seem to have the calming effect Ellie was looking for. The little girl nods, looking out the window.

"Where are we going?"

"Remember the cave? From a few weeks ago?"

"With the mermaids?"

Felicity smiles. "Well, there aren't any mermaids at this cave, remember?"

"That's okay, I like it there," Ellie says definitively, sitting up a little taller to look out the window. "It's like the mermaids in Hawaii."

She butchers Hawaii again and it makes Felicity laugh. She's here, she's content and safe, which means Oliver is safe.

Oliver.

"Who was the company?" Felicity asks Lyla.

Lyla glances in the rearview mirror, giving Felicity a quick assessment. She obviously finds something far better there than she did upstairs - yeah, Felicity had been *freaking the hell out* but now that they're on their way, she feels better. The action helps, moving, doing something instead of waiting. Okay, so maybe some of the fear was the frustration from the entire lack of nothing over the last two weeks.

"I didn't recognize him and I don't think Oliver did, either," Lyla replies. She turns onto the main road that will take them directly to Verdant. "He was strong though." She meets Felicity's eyes again in the mirror. "He knocked down a concrete pillar."

"Mirakuru," Felicity supplies. "That's bad."

"Yeah," Lyla agrees, "and the next question is where did he come from? I didn't think that was exactly… duplicatable without the serum."

"It is," Felicity replies, her stomach sinking. "With blood. From someone with mirakuru already in their system. It's how Roy was infected. Which, talk about *unsafe* because blood diseases are still a thing. Or not, I guess, with mirakuru. But I'd sort of thought that plan was out the window when we caught Slade. Unless they already had some of his blood, or…" Felicity's eyes widen. "He didn't get away did he?"

"No," Lyla responds instantly, shaking her head. "No way. Even if he did, there's absolutely no way he could have gotten back to Starling that quickly. But no, he's locked up, good and tight. I checked this morning."

"So how…"

Isabel. Oh god, *of course* it's Isabel. She was working with Slade. Maybe Slade had others, lying in wait somewhere? Others he'd infected with his blood… just like he had with Roy.

Not good.

Well, from zero to nothing in less than a second. The honeymoon was definitely over.

And Oliver was in danger.

"Where did he come from?" Felicity asks, leaning forward. "Did he…?"

Like a lightning bolt shoving itself through her brain, a thought hits her and Felicity jerks, sitting up taller, her eyes widening as she breathes out a soft, "Oh." Her mind spins, the wheels suddenly clacking together a helluva lot better than they were even a few seconds ago. They're at Queen Consolidated.

They're at Queen Consolidated.

"Give me the tablet," Felicity says. Lyla hesitates, glancing at the screen, like she's afraid how she'll react. And just like that, Felicity's brain spins off on a crazy 'what-if' axis before she shoves the fear down. "And the comm, I have an idea."

Her voice is steady as can be and that's apparently enough for Lyla, who picks up the tablet and hands it back to her. The camera she's focused on is clouded with debris and Felicity's already swiping the screen, running through the options she has as Lyla slips the comm out and hands it over as well.

Just as Felicity puts it into her own ear, Lyla says, "Tell him Johnny and Sara should be there any minute."

"Oliver?" Her voice cracks and she grits her teeth, shaking her head at herself. Despite that, she still sighs in relief when she catches a glimpse of him on one camera. It's just a glimpse, but it's enough, and relief absolutely floods her when he rasps a quick, "Felicity?"

She closes her eyes, replying with, "Oh thank god," before whipping through the cameras, finding him and… "Is that your mother?"

"Long story," he manages before ducking, taking Moira with him as something shiny flies at him. "What's…"

"John and Sara should be there any minute, they're-"

She's cut off by a squeal of tires and the sound of a door opening. Felicity catches sight of Sara in another frame, launching herself at the decidedly beastly guy who doesn't see her coming. The hit knocks him over but he doesn't stay down for long. He's fueled by a drug that's turned him into a madman, but anyone with eyes can see he's been trained for something else because he rolls into the hit and shoves himself up, tackling Sara just as Diggle tries to get in a shot with his gun. The bullet lodges itself in the guy's arm but he doesn't stop for an instant, ramming Sara into another pillar.

"Oliver-" Moira starts, but Oliver pushes her back, crowding her

behind an SUV.

"Mom, *stay down*," Oliver says over the comm before turning to Diggle with a shouted, "We can't leave him here!"

"Any suggestions?" Diggle shouts back, but he doesn't get an answer because they're both on the guy, pulling him off Sara.

Felicity can already see something dark and shiny on the back of Sara's head and she winces, saliva flooding her mouth as that familiar panic starts rearing its head. The other woman's face darkens with an intensity she's rarely seen as she punches him, spinning to kick him. But even through the black and white images flashing over the tablet, Felicity can see it's useless, just like it was with Slade.

"Damn it!" Oliver growls, dodging a punch, but he's not fast enough to avoid a heavy knee that hits him square in the chest. Felicity gasps right along with him, feeling as if she'd just gotten kicked herself as he doubles over. But he's not down for long, using the downward motion to try to sweep the guy off his feet. It works, but it simultaneously nearly sends the car bumper he's holding into Diggle's head. "John!"

"What's happening?" Lyla asks the instant she hears Oliver's shout, and a second later she snaps her jaw shut, realizing she's a distraction. She guns the engine, and the car lurches forward, dodging through traffic.

"He's okay," Felicity answers anyway. She waves her hand to imitate what she saw. "A near miss with a car bumper."

"A car bumper?" Lyla repeats under her breath, shaking her head. She's probably thinking, '*How exactly did this become my life?'* She relaxes though, letting up off the gas, but only slightly. Felicity glances up just enough to see them narrowly missing a car as they pass and she grimaces, hoping they don't hit anyone while also thinking about the incredible damage being done in the QC parking garage.

Felicity vaguely sees Ellie gripping the seat for leverage as she watches the screen with wide eyes. Oh, because that's what she needs to see right now.

Tilting the tablet away from her with a quiet, "Don't look at this, sweetie," Felicity pushes the comm further into her ear before saying, "Oliver, push him to the northeast corner."

"What?"

"The northeast corner!" Felicity repeats.

She forces herself away from the fight scene, swallowing down the bile creeping up her throat. Her heart's racing and her hands shake as she whips to another app, downloading the old plans she'd been working on in her downtime when Oliver had disappeared to Lian Yu after Tommy's death. It should probably strike her as ridiculous how much time she spent planning this thing out, but it doesn't, not even a little, because she's so insanely grateful that her past-self had thought about it.

Felicity can tell Oliver's scrambling to make sense of what she's asking, but he does it anyway, communicating it to Diggle and Sara.

"What's in the northeast corner?" he asks.

"It was supposed to be an elevator shaft, but it isn't finished," Felicity replies. "Yet. Or ever, now, I guess, if we're going to be shoving a giant rage machine down there."

"An elevator shaft to…"

Oliver's cut off, and her hand freezes where she's expanding the blueprints she'd designed several months ago for the lair underneath QC, before Verdant had been fortified from the damage sustained during Malcolm Merlyn's earthquake machines. It'd quickly fallen into a 'backup' lair, one that she'd forgotten about, especially when they'd finally tracked Oliver down to Lian Yu.

When Oliver grunts, she's downsizing the blueprints and pulling the cameras up, whispering, "Oliver?"

The image comes up just in time to see the mirakuru-laced madman haul Oliver up by his throat and throw him into a car.

"No," Felicity gasps just as Sara shouts, "Ollie!"

He lands with a heavy thud on the windshield, the glass shattering as the car alarm pierces the air. Felicity's hand whips out to Ellie without a second thought, gripping her leg as hard as she can as she bites back the horrified gasp. He's not moving - why isn't he moving? - but Ellie's still there.

It's no longer just about them anymore. It was easy to ignore over the last several weeks, but this is a vicious reminder that it's not just her she has to worry about, it's Oliver and Ellie. No wonder she's so much

more secure in the future, she did this at separate times - she got used to seeing Oliver getting hit and standing back up time and time again, just like she did before, but now it's not *just* that - it's both Oliver and Ellie. She's being double-whammied and she doesn't like it at all.

"Momma, that hurts," Ellie whispers, her hands covering Felicity's, and she instantly lets go with a rushed, "Sorry, baby, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that, Ellie-bug, Mommy's just a little scared, that's all."

Like a spark of light in the dark, the instant she speaks Ellie's name, Oliver comes around with a coughed groan. A wave of relief washes through her yet again - she's going to get grays from this, she's positive of it. Thank goodness she already dyes her hair.

"Are you okay?" she asks him.

Ellie leans over and wraps her arms around Felicity's bicep. "Don't be scared, Momma, Daddy'll be okay. He's a hero."

Tears blur her vision as Oliver peels himself off the car, groaning, "I'm fine." He rolls onto his feet with a pained grunt. "I'm okay."

Felicity's eyes slip shut and she leans over, pressing a soft kiss to Ellie's head. "Yes. He is."

She can tell by the way he's walking that he's trying to hide the extent of his pain as he joins the fray again, yanking the guy away from Diggle before the madman's meaty fist can land on the other man's temple.

"Get him to the northeast corner," Felicity repeats, moving so Ellie can still hold onto her arm as she pulls up the blueprints again. "There isn't an access point for it though, you'll have to break the wall."

"Break the wall?" Oliver repeats incredulously. "How the hell…"

"You've kinda got a huge battering ram, if you think about it," she supplies.

"I can't just…"

The sound of flesh connecting with flesh sounds, followed by a distant, "Oops," by Sara.

"Ask nicely?" Felicity suggests. "Or you could…" Oliver and Sara run right into the corner of the parking garage. There's a large pipe off to

one side and it's boxed in by two parked cars, leaving a small cubby just for them… and the car that the guy is suddenly pushing onto its side like it weighs absolutely nothing. He shoves it in a move that will surely crush them. "Watch out!"

Sara barely grabs Oliver in time, yanking him out of the way right before the hood of the car rams into the wall. Felicity doesn't have to be there to hear the heavy groan the wall lets out as a giant crack splinters through the concrete.

He's already moving the car back and Felicity's whispering curses under her breath as she fights the urge to wipe her screen - like *that* will wipe the debris out of the way - and then she hears another heavy crash, like he'd rammed it into the wall again, not realizing that they'd already gotten out of the way. They had, right?

Ellie's still wrapped around her arm, her eyes on the screen, and it takes Felicity a second to realize that.

"Don't look at this, okay, sweetie?" she whispers, nudging her away.

"Was that Daddy?" she asks in a small voice.

"He's okay, alright?" By the simple virtue that Ellie's still *there*, but she keeps that part to herself. "Look, we're almost to the cave."

That gets Ellie's attention, and she's pushing herself up to look outside as Lyla turns into the back alley of Verdant. Felicity looks back at the tablet just in time to see that the car's punched the hole they need in the wall. She catches a blur off to the corner and a quick switch to another camera shows Oliver and Sara standing behind their enraged target.

Lyla puts the car into park, getting out. She opens Ellie's side of the door and says softly, "Hey, little Ellie, you wanna head downstairs?"

"Is Momma coming too?" she asks, leaning back in her seat, her hand darting out to grasp onto Felicity's jeans. "Is Daddy down there?"

"Not yet, but they will be," Lyla replies, her eyes meeting Felicity's over her head. "Right?"

"Yep." Felicity nods emphatically. She's well aware that one danger doesn't preclude another from rearing it's head and Zoom could show up at any second. She has no desire to spend much time away from Lyla's protection. "Why don't you go with Aunt Lyla, and I'll be right

down, okay?"

"What about Daddy?"

"Him, too, but a little bit later."

It takes her a long second to contemplate, and as the sounds of fighting start up again in her ear, Felicity's about to tell Lyla to just go when Ellie says, "Okay. But hurry, Momma."

"I will-"

"What now, Felicity?" Oliver demands breathlessly on the other end, pulling Felicity's attention.

"Go on, Ellie-bug," she whispers before turning back to the tablet. "Push him in."

"Push him in?" he repeats, his voice rising. Felicity looks up long enough to see Ellie wrap herself around Lyla's neck as she shuts the car door. They make their way to the Verdant basement.

"Push him down there," she orders into the comm. "It's a really long drop. It won't kill him, I don't think. I mean, probably not, considering all the mirakuru dancing in his veins, but it will at least keep him down there until we figure something else out."

"What's down there?"

"A really big hole that never got finished."

"What?"

"It's a place to keep him," Felicity says. "There's no other way out but up. He might break some really expensive equipment, now that I think about it, there's still some stuff down there, but it will keep him… contained. Unless he can scale concrete walls. Which… well, let's just think positively."

"Alright," Oliver replies tightly, although it's barely audible over the sudden roar when the guy realizes he's missed them.

Felicity watches him turn with singular intent, but the trio isn't about to let him get away.

As if they'd choreographed the entire thing from the beginning, Oliver, Diggle and Sara tag-team him. Several hits and grunted curses and a

sharp shout from Diggle later, he's right at the opening that he'd punched out himself. The concrete's about ten inches thick - he had to *really* slam that car into the wall to even punch through it. Felicity winces thinking how close they'd come to the force of it crushing Oliver and Sara.

She spends the next two minutes biting her nails and offering warnings where they need them before they finally push him back. Except he grabs onto Sara's jacket, nearly taking her with him. Felicity gasps, jerking so hard that the seat belt she's still wearing locks in place but Oliver snatches Sara back in time, her jacket ripping in the process.

A long, loud scream follows the guy down the half-finished elevator shaft until a heavy, wet thud sounds.

Silence.

"You weren't kidding about it being a long drop," Oliver says dryly.

His voice cuts through the remaining tension and Felicity lets out a breathy laugh, her head dropping. She hears the smack of someone's hand on Oliver's leather-clad shoulder and a heavy sigh that sounds like it comes from Diggle.

"Where'd he come from?" Diggle asks.

"It had to be Isabel," Oliver replies. "We know she was working with Slade. He must have had a backup plan."

"To what end though?" Sara asks.

Oliver sighs, and it's louder than all the other conversation as he says, "I don't know."

They all really need to start carrying comms.

"Is everyone okay?" Felicity asks, switching cameras.

"Yeah," Oliver replies. "You? Ellie?"

"We're safe. We're at the foundry," Felicity responds, watching all three of them as they move away from the hole in the wall, Sara inspecting a cut on her arm, Oliver picking up his bow, Diggle checking his gun when she sees movement out the corner of her eye. "Oh, wait-"

It's Moira.

"Oliver!" his mother yells, running over. She's dusty, her clothes obviously ruined - and that's why Felicity shops in the clearance racks - but she doesn't care as she heads straight for her son. "Are you alright? Are you all alright?"

An alert buzzes over her tablet, drowning out Oliver's response.

"Uh oh."

"What is it?" Oliver asks.

"Uh, well," Felicity replies, her eyes running over the incoming calls on the police scanner. She switches over to the cameras in the upper levels of QC and her eyes widen when she sees the police making their way in through the crowds of people trying to leave the building. "The fight wasn't exactly quiet. SCPD's there. Although that's still pretty fast."

"I told Worthington to call," Oliver replies. "Alright. John, you and Sara take her, I'll get my bike."

"Is that wise?" Felicity hears Moira asking in the background.

"What?" There's an edge of annoyance lining Oliver's words as he addresses Moira, and Felicity's eyebrows go up at the sound. Oh-kay, something definitely happened there. "Yes, I'm not leaving you down here."

"I mean my going off with you, Oliver. Surely the cameras caught something down here, what if Isabel sees us? Don't put it past her to not connect the dots."

"I'll scrub them," Felicity says to Oliver, who shakes his head at his mother. "Hopefully they'll assume whoever rammed a car into the wall didn't actually fall into said wall. Although they might wonder *where* it goes and they might send someone down there… Frak. This all sounded a lot better in my head a few minutes ago."

"There's no other exits down there?" Oliver asks.

"No."

"Okay." He pauses. "I don't want to leave him down there. I didn't recognize him, I don't know who he was." His words are heavy, and

just for her, and Felicity closes her eyes, picturing herself wrapping her arms around him. He worked so hard with Roy, he gave Slade so many chances… now there's another person dosed with mirakuru. Another person he can't save. The soft rustle of leather on the other end tells her that Oliver's suddenly nodding and then he says, "Get back!"

"What are you doing?" Felicity asks.

"Something that's probably going to send the insurance premiums through the roof," he mumbles to her. "We can't leave that open, they'll find him before we get back here."

"Okay, but…"

Felicity switches back to the garage cameras in time to see him pulling out an arrow and nocking it… an arrow with a tiny red light that's slowly blinking.

"Oliver, are you doing what I think you're doing? What if the building…"

But it's too late. He lets the arrow go and turns, not bothering to see if his aim is true, knowing it is. He runs towards the others, saying, "Get her to the van, now!" just as the arrow hits. A loud boom sounds over the comm and the cameras go fuzzy. Felicity flinches, closing her eyes as if she's there, feeling it as if it's happening right below her.

Her fingers are already flying over the screen, searching for a working camera that will show they're okay, but they've all gone offline.

She shoves the comm into her ear, her eyes flying to the spot Ellie had occupied. "Oliver?"

"We're okay, we're on our way out."

"Do we need to have a conversation about structural integrity?"

Oliver grunts. "I didn't hit anything weight bearing."

Felicity snorts. "I hope for your sake that you're right, mister, because if that building topples down on top of you, I'm going to be really pissed. Like I will find a way to bring you back and kill you all over again."

It takes him a second, a very long second where there's nothing but

footsteps and the rustle of clothes, but then Oliver chuckles.

"I love you," he says softly, and she hears the creak of his hood where he's turned his head, so it's for her ears only.

She closes her eyes, taking a deep breath. "I love you. I'm glad you're okay." Felicity sinks into the seat. "This wasn't… this wasn't as easy as I remember it being. Which is saying something considering it wasn't ever that easy."

Oliver sighs, and she feel the weight of her words hitting him. "I know how you feel." He pauses before adding, "I'm going to kiss the hell out of you when I get there."

"That sounds like an amazing plan."

She can hear the smile in his voice. "We're on our way. And just in time, SCPD's flooding the garage."

Felicity waits as he shepherds Moira into the van with Diggle and Sara. When she hears the van door sliding shut and his quick footsteps as he ghosts to wherever he left his bike, she asks, "Did you get hurt?"

"A few scratches," Oliver replies vaguely, and she knows it's more than a scratch. "Nothing major."

"Good."

"What?"

"Ellie saw some of the camera footage before I could stop her." He lets out a distressed sound at that, but she cuts him off. "And she insisted on treating them herself. At least the band-aids part. You tell her it makes you feel better in the future."

He's smiling again. "I'd love that."

Felicity smiles, her hand coming up to rest over her heart. "Come home, Oliver."

Chapter 23

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Diggle's words echo over his comm as Oliver pulls up to the foundry. He drives past Lyla's car, some of his uneasiness disappearing when he sees it's in one piece. Logically he knew it had to be, since they'd arrived safe and sound, and he'd talked to Felicity afterwards. But still, seeing is believing.

He parks his bike in the shadows before climbing off and glancing around, tugging his hood down. He winces when the movement pulls at the cut in his arm, which in turn has his entire back tensing in pain. Oliver bites back a groan, trying to force himself to relax, but it doesn't work all that well. He feels like a giant walking bruise. Getting thrown full force into a car will do that.

"I don't think we have much choice," he replies as he enters the back door to the club, taking a side hallway to reach the basement of the foundry. "I don't want her at the house right now. We don't know where that guy came from or how many more like him Isabel has. And it's not like QC is exactly safe."

"Yeah, well, your mother hanging out in the Arrow Cave isn't exactly safe either."

Oliver sighs. "Don't call it that."

"That wicked smart girlfriend of yours makes it sound way too fun not to."

The mention of Felicity has a smile pulling at his lips and he moves faster, already hearing the soft chatter coming from below. He pauses at the top of the stairs, touching his comm.

"Just bring her here." He pauses, his voice lowering, remembering the sight of Moira stepping out of that limo. "It's not just a safety issue, John. She went to Worthington on her own. She wasn't supposed to be there."

"I get that, Oliver. I just don't think right now is the best time to be bringing family drama to work."

His eyes slip shut. Diggle's right, and Oliver knows it, but he also can't

let this happen again. Especially now that they know Isabel has way more ammunition than they'd assumed. He can't worry about his mother using underhanded means to manipulate the goddamn board all while Isabel is trying to take them out of the picture completely. He assumes that's what she was doing, anyhow. The timing had been too big of a coincidence to be an accident. What if he hadn't been there? What if she'd gotten hurt? And that just brings him right back around to the mirakuru. He'd honestly thought Slade's plan had gone down with him.

What else is Isabel up to?

And *that* just brings him right back to his mother meddling around at QC.

Oh yes, they were going to have a discussion.

Diggle clears his throat inconspicuously - no, a little guiltily - and Oliver wonders if it's because of his mom. It probably is. He can perfectly imagine her arched eyebrow and sharp eyes landing on Diggle at his words.

"Alright, we're heading over," the other man sighs. "Eventually. Damn traffic. It's like people haven't seen the SCPD before."

Oliver grunts in acknowledgement. The traffic around QC had stalled everything out, including John, Sara and his mother. It hadn't been an issue for his bike though, although he had had to take a main street, causing quite the stir when a herd of people had caught a glimpse of him.

More Arrow Youtube videos. Felicity was going to be thrilled.

"I'll see you when you get here, John."

"Copy."

Oliver clicks his comm off, pulling his hood back as he slips his quiver off, making his way down the stairs with light feet.

He catches sight of Lyla first, standing near Felicity's computers. Her head's ducked as she talks on her phone, but when Oliver's feet hit the metal grate stairs, she looks up, eyes narrowing, hand slipping to her holster. The instant she recognizes him, her stance relaxes. She offers him a smile, one he returns readily. And then she nods to one of the tables, where Ellie and Felicity sit.

They're bent over the stainless steel surface, what looks like band-aids sprawled out before them. They're deep in conversation, Felicity's hand on Ellie's back, her fingers playing with the little girl's long hair as Ellie… draws?

When he reaches the middle of the stairs, his feet land a little harder and the sound has Felicity looking up. Her eyes brighten, a smile tugging at her mouth. Her lips move in a silent, "Oliver," and before he can say anything, she's off her stool and heading towards him, just as Ellie looks up with a delighted, "Daddy!"

Felicity's relief is tangible - hell, so is his. He'd stepped away a few nights over the last few weeks, but it'd been nothing like this, nothing with this level of danger, with this level of the unknown. They were finally starting to step back into the fray and he'd be lying to himself if he said he hadn't spent a good chunk of the time thinking about Ellie and Felicity when he'd been getting tossed around like a ragdoll.

The second he reaches the base of the stairs, Oliver sets his bow down with a soft, "Hey," smiling…

Felicity's response is to grab the front of his jacket with one hand, tugging him down to her level as the other cups his jaw. Her nails scrape at his stubble, her lips turning up in a relieved smile as she whispers his name before kissing him.

Oliver sighs, melting into her. She wraps herself around him, urging him to do the same. And he does. God, he does. He wants to rip his gloves off so he can touch her, slip his hand under her shirt and jacket, feel her skin against his, but that would require letting her go and he's so not willing to do that, not yet. Not ever.

It doesn't last nearly long enough. Just as soon as it began, she's pulling back, licking her lips.

But he's not done.

Oliver shakes his head, his lips finding hers again. Felicity lets out a tiny whimper, kissing him back with equal ardor. The kiss grows, neither holding anything back - it's loving and gentle but at the same time there's a frantic air about it, something desperate, like they're both making sure this is *real.* And it is. It's very real, and it's perfect, and he doesn't want to let her go.

He doesn't feel his wounds when she grips his shoulder nor does he feel any of the frustration or anger from the garage. It all takes a

backseat as he revels in the simple joy of being in her arms again. He's *home*.

Soon the need for oxygen becomes too much and they pull apart. He catches the scrape of a stool on the ground in the background, followed by the pitter-patter of small feet.

"Wow," Oliver whispers breathlessly. "Hi."

She grins, pressing her forehead to his. "Hi." Felicity runs her hands down his shoulders and biceps. "Are you okay?"

"I am now," he replies.

Oliver kisses her again - he can't not kiss her, it's a need that takes over everything in that split second. He slides his hand up the back of her neck, cupping the back of her head. This one is chaste, quiet, but they both linger, just holding each other. He wraps his other arm around her waist, digging his fingers in. His palm itches to do more - he wants to grab her backside and haul her closer, *feel* more of her. He wants to shuck the gloves, find the warmth of her skin, dive in and never leave…

His leather pants are suddenly a little tighter, and it doesn't help when she pushes herself up onto her toes, her hips brushing against his. He bites back a groan. He's more than cognizant enough to know they can't do more - not right now at least - and before he does something that his daughter and Lyla definitely do not need to see, he pulls back again.

Felicity lets out a shaky breath and then she's nodding rapidly as she says under her breath, "Oh, we are so taking that shower later."

Oliver laughs.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

He pulls back to find an excited toddler next to them, her arms shooting up in the air when he looks at her, waiting to be picked up. Oliver grins and leans down, swooping her into his arms.

"Ellie kiss!" she exclaims the second her feet leave the ground. Oliver and Felicity don't have to think twice anymore, it's become so routine - they wrap themselves around her, their lips touching in a kiss that represents everyone's home, safe and sound.

When they untangle, Ellie instantly wraps herself around him.

Oliver's eyes slip shut as he hugs her close, saying, "Hi, baby."

She digs her face into his neck, taking a deep breath - like that was all she needed, the scent of her father - of *home* - and her little body instantly relaxes.

"I'm glad you're okay," she says, her voice muffled against his throat.

His heart clenches, his gut tightening. He rubs her back, whispering, "I'm okay," before pressing a kiss to her temple.

"I saw you on the screen," she continues, sitting up. Oliver frowns at that, his eyes flying to Felicity who winces, mouthing, '*Oops,'* at him. "Momma was scared, but I told her you'd be okay. Because you're a hero!"

She says it with such an air of confidence, of surety, that it renders him speechless.

"He's definitely a hero," Felicity says, her hand covering his on Ellie's back. Their eyes meet and he's overwhelmed all over again.

"And then Momma said you were okay and that you were coming here, so Aunt Lyla and me came down here, but you still needed Momma so she stayed in the car because she was helping you like she does on the big computers and when we got down here, Aunt Lyla said…"

"Wait, hang on," Oliver interrupts. Ellie furrows her brow and Oliver says, "Sorry, sweetie, I just…" He narrows his eyes at Felicity. "You were upstairs alone?"

She rolls her eyes, saying, "Oliver…" but he ignores her.

"Especially with what just happened," he starts, enunciating the words slowly for the emphasis he can't really express in front of their three-year-old. He grabs her arm. "I don't want you alone right now, Felicity. *Please*."

"I get it, but-"

"Great-"

"But I'm pretty sure I can-"

"Then we agree," Oliver interrupts. She shoots him an exasperated look. "You'll have someone with you at all times."

"Oliver, I can sit in a car on my own for five seconds-"

"Felicity." Oliver steps closer to her, cupping the side of her neck. Her hand flies up to grip his forearm, opening her mouth to argue some more, but he doesn't let her. "We don't know enough to not be on guard, okay? And I know it's asking a lot, I know that, but… Please, just…" He closes his eyes for second, his grip on her tightening before he meets her gaze again. "Please."

It takes her a moment - a long moment. He sees the struggle in her eyes, the frustration, but he also knows she gets it. Pursing her lips, she finally relents and he lets out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He just *needs* to know she's safe.

Felicity sighs, patting his arm. "Yes, dear."

Oliver huffs out a tiny laugh. She just raises an eyebrow at him - she's not happy, he knows that. But her safety comes first. He pulls her closer for another kiss. The second their lips touch, she melts against him, her grip tightening. He'll have to take advantage of that reaction as much as possible.

"Thank you," he whispers.

"I guess I should be the one saying that, since you *are* trying to keep me and Ellie safe." She makes a face. "Even if it's driving me crazy."

"It won't be forever," Oliver promises. He really hopes he's telling the truth with that, because he knows he can't police her every move, just like they can't live their lives looking over their shoulders.

"Daddy, look what I made you," Ellie says. They break apart and Oliver looks at what his daughter's holding. "Look!"

She has a giant grin plastered to her face as she holds out a large band-aid with something drawn on it… but what it is, he can't tell.

"Wow, Ellie-bug, that's amazing," he says. He tilts his head to see if another angle will clarify what the hell she drew, but it doesn't. "Is that…?"

Felicity taps his arm and his eyes fly to her. She mouths, '*Rascal.*'

Ah.

"Is that Rascal the Raccoon?" Oliver asks.

"Yes, Daddy, it is!" Ellie says with so much delight it makes him chuckle. "There aren't any Rascal band-aids here, so I made them for you. For your owies."

Felicity's words from earlier filter through his mind and he smiles softly. "That would make me feel so much better. Thank you." Her answering grin is perfect. He'd let her cover him in Rascal band-aids until the end of time if it meant her smiling like that. "I have an owie on my arm that needs a special Rascal band-aid."

"Okay!"

Ruffling her hair, he kisses her cheek again before picking up his bow and quiver. He nudges Felicity back over to where he'd first seen them sitting. He glances at Lyla. She's still on the phone, and he catches a, "Johnny," in response to something she heard on the other side. She gives Oliver a smile again before Diggle says something, pulling her attention away.

Oliver sets Ellie down on the table, making sure she's secure before he unzips his jacket. They go through the process, Felicity patting the stool for him to sit down. She starts cleaning the cut out, being overly gentle and thorough, but not for his sake, oddly enough. It's for Ellie, who's saying, "We gotta clean it to get all the germies out, right Momma?"

"That's right," Felicity replies, sharing a smile with Oliver. "Nobody wants germies. Germies are gross."

The cut isn't too deep, but it's long from where the car windshield had cut him. It's a stark reminder of what he'd faced only moments ago, and just as quickly as the burden had lifted from his shoulders when he'd walked into the foundry and saw his girls, it's back. He wonders if it's because of the last few weeks or because he's wading in a tiny pool of denial but he suddenly wants it all to go away. He wants to go back to the last weekend when they'd gone swimming, when things had been quiet and simple, when things had been about discovering the little moments, moments that included the very real terror of watching his daughter leap into the water without any regard to her safety. And seeing Felicity in a bikini for the first time. That… that had been memorable.

He feels like he'd been existing in a perfect bubble and it'd suddenly popped. Probably because it had.

"It doesn't hurt that much, does it?" Felicity asks.

"What?"

"You're pouting."

Ellie giggles at that.

"You think that's funny?" Oliver asks. He tickles her, making her laugh even harder, nearly falling off the table into his arms as she curls around his hand. The trust that he'll always be there to catch her makes his heart feel a hundred times bigger. She's so small, and it takes barely any effort to keep her in place.

His eyes meet Felicity's and he knows she's fully aware that whatever face he's making has nothing to do with the cut. She doesn't say anything though, not with Ellie right there. Instead, she finishes cleaning the cut with flourish before turning to their daughter with a smile.

"Alright, the patient is yours, Ellie-bug."

Their daughter nods definitively with an, "Okay." He turns to her, holding his arm out for her and she pats his shoulder. "Gonna make you all better, Daddy."

Oliver bites the inside of his lip as Ellie opens the band-aid. Felicity's also staring at the little girl, her face soft, before meeting Oliver's gaze. He wants to tell her that he's already better - no, maybe not, but he's getting there, he's on a path towards it, a path he never could have imagined. So much is in the air, has been in the air, and while it definitely feels like they're being slapped in the face with reality all of a sudden, these little moments make it more bearable.

When Ellie suddenly leans over, blowing a lungful of air all over the wound, they both chuckle before she lays the band-aid on him. When it's on, he says, "Thank you." But she grips his arm, shaking her head as she says, "No, Daddy, I'm not done." And she's not. She'd drawn on several other bandages and all of them go on his arm until the cut is very well covered in Ellie-made Rascal the Raccoon band-aids.

"There!" Ellie declares. "All better!"

Oliver thanks her by giving her a messy kiss before setting her on the floor again just as the door at the top of the stairs opens again. They all look up to find Diggle first, then Sara… and then Moira.

Lead fills his stomach, especially when his eyes meet his mother's.

"You got her?" Felicity asks, indicating Ellie and pulling him back to the calming immediate presence of his daughter. "I want to follow-up on some searches I started on the tablet, trying to find our mirakuru mystery man."

Oliver nods. Felicity smiles, patting his uninjured arm before moving around him to get to her computer station, but he stops her for a quick kiss. Because he can. Just one more moment for the road before they get back to the work.

And just like that, a flip switches and it's back to business as usual. The group congregates - Sara steps closer to Oliver as John greets Lyla with a soft kiss to the temple, all with Moira hanging on the fringes, uncharacteristically quiet. He's willing to let that slide - for the moment - as he watches Felicity where she's at in the center.

She sits down, every inch of her attention already on the task ahead of her.

"Okay, come to momma," Felicity says flexing her fingers as she settles in front of the keyboard, focusing on the monitor in a way that feels like he hasn't seen in a million years, instead of just a couple of weeks. It's oddly comforting, giving the idea of *home* a whole new meaning, one he would've never applied to it.

She's in the zone, that headspace where her entire awareness is honed in on whatever the screen in front of her is conveying, so it takes her a moment to realize Ellie is standing at her side staring at her. It's a credit to how much has changed that she notices at all - she gets so wrapped up in her work - but she must feel Ellie's eyes on her because she jolts, her eyes flying to the toddler.

"Something wrong?" Felicity asks, glancing quickly up toward him before looking back to their daughter.

"You said to come," Ellie replies, her little brow furrowing in confusion.

"What?" Felicity starts, equally bewildered. "I didn't…"

Oliver makes sense of what happened first, laughing sharply and shaking his head as he steps forward to scoop Ellie up into his arms, half because she needs to stop distracting Felicity and half because he really just wants to hold her.

"Don't worry about it," Oliver advises with a broad grin as Digg and Sara chuckle in the background. "I'll explain later. I've got her. You concentrate on that so we can put this together. Okay?"

She's so distracted by her task at hand that her mind still hasn't caught up with what was actually said, but she nods hesitantly his way before turning back toward the screen, losing herself in lines of code and programing that Oliver knows he could never hope to understand.

"What do you usually do when Mommy and I are on a mission?" Oliver asks Ellie while she plays with the collar of his black t-shirt.

"In the bunker?" Ellie asks curiously, looking up at him.

"The…? Yeah, sure, in the bunker," he agrees, because he's never been a fan of calling it 'the lair' or 'the Arrow cave' and while bunker isn't a whole lot better, he'll take it.

"It's bigger," she confides in him, biting her lip a little like she's worried this will somehow upset him. "I have toys there. And a bed. Sometimes I take naps and sometimes I play with Sara. But usually I practice!"

"Practice what?" he asks.

"With my bow," she replies easily.

He stops breathing at that.

"I've gots to practice more, though," she tells him, continuing on like she hasn't just floored him. She's concentrating on his shirt as she talks, her hands following the collar, her eyes focused on them. "I try real hard but a lot of times it doesn't go far enough. I'll get better, though, Daddy. I promise."

It's important to her, so insanely important… because it's important to *him.* To *them.*

Everything utterly freezes. Part of him wonders what his future self was thinking, putting a bow and arrows in his little girl's hands. But a bigger part of him is taken completely off-guard by how incredible

this entire notion makes him feel - how *proud*. For all the worst of humanity he's seen thanks to his mission, for all the horrible things he's done, there's also this - the wide-eyed gaze of his little girl who wants only to be like him, to make him proud. And, God, that's not something he'd ever thought he'd have, not once, not before Ellie.

"Oliver..." Diggle prompts. His voice jolts Oliver back into the present, forces air into his lungs and his attention back to his little girl who is staring at him with concern like she's said something wrong.

"You…" he starts, his tongue feeling like it's coated in molasses. "You shoot arrows?"

"Just the soft ones," she replies, looking back at her tiny fingers as they migrate down to his bicep. "You showed me how, Daddy. We practice together." She's silent for a moment after that, clearly anxious at his lack of a response. In a tiny whisper he can barely even hear she breathes out a quiet, "I really like it."

"Me too," he echoes without a second thought, no louder than her. Her hand stills, the worry melting away she looks back at him.

"Really?" she asks. He could kick himself for making her question how much this means to him, how much it *will* mean to him.

"Yeah," he agrees, smiling at her with so much affection that he's sure it's painted all over his face. "Yeah, Ellie-bug, I can't wait to train with you."

"Can we do that while Momma does her search?" Ellie asks hopefully.

"I don't have any soft arrows, baby," he tells her. "Or a bow your size." But he knows immediately that he's going to change that at the first opportunity he gets. The idea of teaching her to shoot, of taking something that's mostly steeped in his worst memories and turning it into a bonding experience with his daughter… He looks forward to that with an intensity that surprises him.

He and Ellie are far from alone. Lyla's on the phone, probably with ARGUS, keeping one eye on the entrance to the lair. Digg's somewhere behind him checking Sara's head to see if she needs stitches. Felicity's behind her computer. His *mother* stands awkwardly in the center of the room, more than a little rumpled and out of sorts as she takes in her surroundings - her eyes linger on his case of arrows, her face unreadable. But the world reduces down to the two of them for a long moment as Ellie smiles and nods, her eyes shining with love and trust

and so many things he hadn't believed he'd deserved not very long ago.

"Maybe Momma can make me one like she made yours!" Ellie says brightly.

His gaze slides over to Felicity, smiling at the memory of her gift to him when he'd gotten back from Lian Yu. She's already staring back at him, her fingers unmoving against the keyboard. She's as captivated by Ellie as he is, every inch as in love with her and this incredible bond they've all forged so quickly.

It's *distracting*.

"Maybe," Oliver agrees, smiling back at Ellie before kissing her forehead. "But for now, how about you play with your doll for a bit. There's a cot over there you can sit on with her, okay?"

"Okay," Ellie nods. "I gotta help her anyhow. She got scared. I need to tell her it's okay so she doesn't have bad dreams."

Concern floods him at her words and he definitely doesn't miss Felicity's sharp inhale, having heard her, too. Ellie hasn't been having any bad dreams lately, any that they know of at least, and she *looks* fine. But she has been through so much. Even though she's coped better than he has any right to expect from a three-year-old, it has to have taken its toll on her.

"Ellie… you're fine," he tells her. "So's your baby doll. You know that, right? You don't need to worry."

"Don't be silly, Daddy," she huffs at him with a long-suffering shake of her head that reminds him eerily of Felicity. "I know that. It's *baby* who doesn't. But she's little still. It's okay. I can help her…" She wiggles slightly. "I need down, Daddy."

In spite of the fact that she really does seem okay and he has a ton of things that need his attention, he hesitates before lowering her to the ground. She is undeniably his first priority, above anything else - above himself, above his mission, above the city. Strangely, that realization doesn't bother him. His own father had told him to right his wrongs and… Oliver can't help but wonder if this was part of what he'd meant. He knows his father loved him. He's never doubted that. But Robert Queen had certainly put other obligations ahead of his relationship with his family. Oliver will never do that. He's barely known Ellie for two weeks, but he already knows that much.

Whatever other duties he has in his life, now or later, his daughter's well-being, her ability to be secure in the knowledge that she will always, *always* be able to rely on him… that wins. Against anything else. Against everything else.

But for now, she's fine.

She hums to herself as she runs across the lair to grab her doll. She scurries toward the cot, petting the baby's head comfortingly with one hand while she dangles it by its arm with the other.

"You aren't wrong," Felicity says, reading his mind. "She's a crazy resilient kid. Obviously. She is *ours*, so it makes sense. Especially if we're still all… hooded up in the future, which apparently we are, but she's still *three* and she saw way more over my shoulder on the tablet than I'd like."

"How much did she see of the fight?" Oliver asks.

Felicity winces, a little flinch as her eyes dart over to where Ellie is happily stroking her doll's hair and singing a song about rainbows.

"Too much," she admits. "I didn't mean for her to, but *wow* is it hard to keep a kid sitting right next to you from looking at the tablet you're working on. Especially when you're distracted by pesky life-or-death situations."

Oliver's brow furrows at that and he looks back toward Ellie, who has taken to explaining to her doll about her fairies. You'd never have any idea what she's been through these past few weeks by looking at her now, but that only eases Oliver's concerns a little.

"We should talk to her later," Oliver decides aloud, eyes meeting Felicity's looking for agreement. He finds it.

"I think we have to," she says after a moment. She nods at him and bites her lower lip as she thinks. "I mean, the longer that she's, you know, *here*, and with all the insane things that keep happening... there's no way this doesn't all affect her in the future. Uh, her future. By which I mean some nebulous time that may or may not be before her birth. God, time travel gives me a headache. I should call Cisco... *Oh*!" She jumps in her chair, turning to Oliver. "I should call Cisco!"

"There's something there that I didn't quite follow," Oliver replies slowly, willing his brain to catch up with his girlfriend's words so that they make sense.

"Don't think any of us did," Digg says as he closes in on them with Sara at his side. Oliver's mother stays further back, unnervingly quiet. Still, when he glances at her, it's a testament to her that she looks like she's always belonged there, despite also somehow seeming ridiculously out of place as she tries to fix her hair. It's a testament and a damn annoyance, only further reminding him that he really doesn't want her here right now. Or ever.

"Cisco," Felicity says again more insistently. "I'd kind of pushed all things Slade onto the back burner since we captured him, but with Mirakuru Guy Number Two trapped in a makeshift dungeon under QC… well, I'm starting to think that might have been a mistake."

"Where does Cisco come in?" Sara asks.

"Now that we actually *have* Slade, we can get a sample of his blood," Felicity points out, looking slightly too gleeful given her words. "He's like patient zero. If there's any way to counteract what's been done to him and the other guy, Caitlin and Cisco can find it."

"And counteracting what was done to Roy," Sara adds, "if we can find him."

A noticeable lift filters through the entire foundry - *this,* this is something they can all work with. All they needed was a plan… a plan that has Oliver's gut sinking, one that sits heavily and leaves his stomach sour.

Felicity doesn't miss it for a second, instantly picking up on his unease. "What is it?"

He sighs and licks his lips, mostly to buy himself another second to think. When her eyes narrow, he knows she recognizes that sign, the thing he always does: *guilt*. That's what this feeling is. It's so familiar at this point that he feels like he's missing something without it. But these last few days - these last few *weeks* - it's been, if not absent entirely, lighter, less of a burden. The knowledge that he's failed others has felt less like a defeat when he's been able to see so clearly that he hasn't failed Ellie, he doesn't fail Felicity. They've made everything more bearable.

Which makes what he's about to say even harder.

"It can be cured," he admits, trying - and failing - to ignore the look of hurt that flashes across Felicity's face.

Everyone falls silent.

"Might have been good to have that information a few months ago," Digg notes, folding his arms across his chest, which only emphasizes the annoyance underlying his words at Oliver's tendency to keep things close to the vest.

"I know," Oliver agrees, avoiding all of their eyes, choosing to watch Ellie for a moment instead. But even Ellie doesn't help. Not this time. Not when he knows that she wouldn't be facing *any* of the threats from their current timeline if only he'd cured Slade all those years ago instead of trying to kill him.

"So why didn't you tell us earlier?" Felicity demands.

He doesn't want to say it. Saying it makes it real. It means she'll *know*. But she's asking for an explanation and she - of all people - deserves one… and if the last few weeks have proven anything, it's that he'll do whatever she asks.

"Because all of this is my fault," he replies quietly. The truth of his words sits so heavily on his shoulders that they sag under the weight. "I could have stopped this years ago, before it ever began. If I'd just… he'd have never come after Ellie and absolutely nothing going on right now would have even been a problem."

It's like a vacuum sucks all the sound of the room, leaving nothing but silence.

He almost gives into the urge to bow his head, to close his eyes, but they invariably find Felicity. She's *quiet*, sizing him up in silence, weighing his words. He gulps heavily under her scrutiny, begging her with his eyes to forgive him.

"Guys," she says after a few beats. She stands, looking towards the group. "Can we have a minute, please?"

Oliver's heart is firmly lodged in his throat.

"Felicity," he breathes, "I'm so sor-"

"Hold on to that thought," she interrupts as Diggle nods. He and Lyla walks with Sara back toward where Moira stands.

It barely passes as privacy, but it's as close to a quiet moment between them as they're getting right now and they both know it.

"Felicity…"

"How?" she asks simply, looking up at him.

There's so much to that question that he's not quite sure where to start. When did it start to become his fault? When he'd injected Slade with the mirakuru? When he'd started sleeping with Shado? When he'd failed to save her? The more he thinks about it, the further back it goes. But, ultimately, it all boils down to one factor.

"I could have cured Slade back on the island," he confesses. "I could have… He'd been my friend and maybe I could have saved him. But I didn't. I tried to kill him instead." He pauses, the weight of his next words dragging him even further down. "I thought I had killed him."

That damned silence comes back.

Waiting is the worst. Felicity isn't prone to silence, so when she's quiet it makes the air feel thick in his throat, his entire body crawling with the worst sort of anticipation.

After a moment, she asks, "Did you think I'd forgotten that you've killed people?"

"He was my friend," Oliver points out in an almost broken whisper.

"Was…" Felicity emphasizes, grabbing his hand and slotting her fingers between his. "He *was* your friend. Now? Now he's a monster I watched try to murder my daughter over breakfast. I don't know when that changed, and I don't know when he became so thoroughly unredeemable. But Oliver…" She cups his face, urging him to look at her. "I'm the very last person in the world who's going to judge you for trying to kill him. I want him cured so you can try it *again*."

Oliver blinks.

Nothing about her words are vindictive. They're *protective*. She wants Ellie safe. She wants a sense of security for their daughter that can only be found with Slade and mirakuru out of the picture entirely. And while it doesn't entirely remove the weight on his shoulders, it does make it slightly easier to bear the load.

He takes a shaky breath, some small part of him marveling at her ability to always do that for him.

"This is not your fault," she says, squeezing his hand and watching him

over the rim of her glasses with a burning intensity that he's certain is meant to drive her point home. "None of it. So stop living in the past. No one here blames you for it and you can't rewrite it. All we can do is deal with the here and now. And right now… right now we need to figure out who Mirakuru Henchman Junior is and get Lyla to secure us a blood sample from Slade before calling in a really big, very quiet favor to our friends at S.T.A.R. Labs."

He can't quite feel the truth of her words, though he can't argue their accuracy. There's too much that bogs him down, too many reminders that absolution isn't something truly within his reach. But *she* believes what she's saying and her faith in him is enough to carry him through. For now.

Besides, her focus on what they need to do next is undeniably on-point and lingering on the past does them no favors.

"Okay," he agrees, bringing up their joined hands to kiss her fingers. "Okay…" Taking a deep breath, he lets go, steps back and looks toward the others. "Lyla, can we get a sample of Slade's blood?"

"Already done," she responds crisply, closing the distance between them. Digg and Sara follow suit and the air in the lair shifts from something intensely intimate between him and Felicity to something wholly team oriented in the blink of an eye. Is this what it will be like now? Will they keep shifting so easily between *them* and the team? For something he had built up as so very impossible, his relationship with Felicity thus far feels surprisingly easy, natural.

"And Waller's okay with that?" Diggle asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Waller's… uninformed," Lyla hedges.

"You do know it is absolutely not going to stay that way," Diggle points out.

"Let me worry about Waller," Lyla says, her tone telling the entire room she's done with this aspect of the conversation. "There's enough for you to focus on without worrying about her. I've got men picking up the combatant you trapped beneath Queen Consolidated." Her eyes jump between Oliver and Felicity. "What do we know about where he came from and what he was after?"

"The board," Oliver replies. "It has to be. There's no way it was a coincidence he showed up right when Worthington did."

"Maybe," Sara allows. "But trust me when I say there are a lot easier and more subtle ways to kill a room full of old, rich businessmen."

"I'm going to tactfully decline to ask how you know that," Felicity chimes in as she sits back down at her computers. "But also agree that you are probably right."

"So why did she go that route?" Digg asks. "Why not just poison the coffee at the meeting?"

"Now there's a cheery thought." Felicity winces. "It makes me glad I'm very particular about my coffee. Always brought my own."

Oliver can't help the small smile that tugs at his lips at that - it was one of the hundreds of things he'd noticed about her.

"She was probably testing him," Lyla says, getting back to the point. "She's trying to make herself an army of supersoldiers, just like the original purpose for mirakuru. She may have had success in inducing the intended effects, but her influence on him had to have been an unknown factor. I think it failed. I think she had no way of knowing Oliver would be there and the soldier's orders were to take out the board. He could have gotten past Oliver and gone after Worthington, but he didn't."

Oliver nods, following her logic. "Because mirakuru doesn't exactly leave someone capable of normal thought processes. It makes you almost invincible and wildly aggressive, but it also nearly erases self-control. There's a reason the Japanese military never made use of the serum and I don't believe that it was entirely because they'd lost it on Lian Yu. There's no controlling someone dosed with mirakuru."

"Well, Isabel doesn't seem to know that," Felicity points out, turning back toward her monitor as the computer starts beeping softly. She clicks a few keys before adding, "And I think that this guy might have just been the beginning."

The way her brow furrows in worry might have been cute had the subject at hand not been quite so distressing. But as it is, Oliver's heart does a little flip for reasons having nothing at all to do with his girlfriend and everything to do with the way she sucks in a breath and holds it while she stares at the screen.

"What is it?" he asks.

"Facial recognition got a hit," she tells him. "Junior - and I'm not just

calling him that this time; it's his actual name - is an escaped inmate from Iron Heights. SCPD kept it super hush-hush, as you do in Starling City when you have escaped murderers, apparently, but there was an inmate transport vehicle that got hijacked a month ago. Junior was on it. Along with twenty-three other inmates." She looks at Oliver and the look on her face has his chest tightening. "They're all unaccounted for."

"She has all of them," Diggle says, voicing Oliver's thoughts. "She's dosed *all* of them. Oliver, this wasn't just a test for one souped-up inmate. This was a test for all of them. To see how much she could control them."

"And if she's got them," Sara adds, "what's to say she hasn't made more? There's a lot of street kids out there that no one would miss if she had them grabbed and dosed… Like Roy."

"Well, she miscalculated on that," Felicity says, her voice hardening. "Roy's family, even if he's not here at the moment. He's *not* forgotten. I've had programs looking for him since he disappeared. Just to make sure he was okay."

Oliver frowns. "And they've found nothing?"

He makes his way over to her, leaning on the desk, his eyes scanning the various screens.

"Roy's street smarts way outstrip mine," Felicity says. "By a lot. If he wants to go unnoticed, he knows how. But we'll find him." Reading the skepticism on his face, she continues. "Eventually. He has to show up somewhere. He does have to eat, and drink, and… other things. And when we do find him - which we will - we'll have the cure ready for him. But for now…" Felicity waves at the screen filled with the mugshots of a couple dozen ex-cons. "We need to focus on the immediate threat."

"You're right," Oliver agrees, turning back to the group. "So how's Isabel doing this?"

Felicity's hand suddenly shoots out, gripping his forearm tightly as an idea clearly occurs to her.

She takes a moment before speaking and he can practically see the wheels turning in her head before she looks up at him.

"The break in at S.T.A.R. Labs," she says. "We still don't know what

they took, but they had *loads* of experimental equipment there and a lot of it was medical. If they couldn't get the centrifuge from QC's Applied Sciences - and they couldn't because we blew it up - there's a good chance they got something like it from S.T.A.R. Labs."

"It was a biotransfuser," Lyla supplies, pulling everyone's attention to her. "ARGUS took an interest."

That's a comforting thought.

Felicity's already nodding, turning back to her computers. "That could easily be retrofitted to administer mirakuru. But using it would be a huge draw on the power grid."

"And cause a power surge?" Sara questions. "Like the one during the press conference?"

"But that was weeks ago," Felicity says, shaking her head. "That would mean…"

That would mean that Slade's plan has continued uninterrupted even in his absence. The dots connect with alarming clarity. They stopped absolutely nothing when they beat Slade, because he'd already had the wheels in motion when he'd attacked them at the Manor. *Of course* he did. Oliver's hand curls into tight fists. Slade isn't an idiot. No, he's one of the smartest and most conniving men Oliver has ever met… and he'd underestimated him, *again*, just like he had on the freighter. When he'd thought Slade was dead.

God, how could he have not seen this was coming? Isabel merely picked up his mantle and made it her own, likely with Sebastian Blood at her side.

"They're planning to destroy the city," Oliver says slowly. "And rebuild it with themselves as its saviors. They're going to turn loose the mirakuru soldiers to tear apart the city and step through the rubble to position themselves as the political and business leaders who rebuilt Starling from the ground up."

"Then it's a good thing we're around to stop them," Digg supplies.

Yes, yes it is.

Oliver pushes off her desk as he addresses them.

"Felicity, you wanna call Cisco?" he asks. "We need their help on the

cure immediately." She's nodding, already grabbing her phone. She steps away as he turns to the rest of the group. "Lyla, can ARGUS track where that power surge drained the grid from?"

"We can definitely try," Lyla replies. "Although Felicity might have more luck with that."

"I'm going to ask her to try and track it, too," Oliver says. "But any help ARGUS can provide is welcome."

He means without Waller's knowledge, but he's also positive that Lyla knows that so it stays unsaid.

"I'm on it," Lyla agrees, pulling out her phone.

"Sara…" Oliver begins.

"I'll call my dad," she says, preempting his statement. "He needs to know what's coming. There's nothing the SCPD will be able to do against mirakuru, but they can make sure an emergency plan is in place."

She's right. The police won't be able to do a thing against these combatants. That's their job… but it's not their only one. His eyes slide over to the cot where Ellie is tucking her doll under the blanket, patting its head while she makes shushing noises.

As everyone moves off, he's left standing with Diggle.

Oliver licks his lips, his eyes still locked on Ellie as he asks softly, "How do we do this?"

"One moment at a time, man," Diggle tells him, his hand settling heavily on Oliver's shoulder. "One moment at a time."

Their eyes meet and the solidarity he sees there is grounding. There's truth in his words, but it's also nowhere near as simple as that. And yet, with all of them there, he feels like it's possible.

Oliver sighs. "I need you to stay with Ellie and Felicity."

"You need backup in the field," Digg counters.

"I need to not be distracted worrying about their safety," Oliver replies. "Isabel and her mirakuru soldiers aren't the only threat right now, not even close. And there is no one in the world I trust as much as you to keep them safe. Sara and Lyla can watch my back." He

pauses, trying to convey the weight of what he's asking to the other man. "I need you here."

Diggle's jaw clenches and Oliver knows he wants to argue, but he doesn't. Instead, after a moment, he slowly nods. He doesn't like it, but it's clear he understands where Oliver is coming from.

"How about," Diggle says, and it's his turn for the weighty gaze. "I'll get your girls' backs if you get mine."

It's striking how similar a place they're in at this point, looking to each other to protect their once-and-future wives, their daughters-to-be. Oliver's felt a kinship with Digg from near the start of their mission, but never like this. He grips Diggle's shoulder and squeezes in agreement.

"Always," he tells him, earning a solemn nod. "You have my word, John."

A quiet moment of calm, so rare in their world, suffuses the lair in spite of the dangers they're facing. Felicity and Sara find their way back, filling them in - Felicity talked to Cisco, he's on standby for the blood, and Sara left a message for her father. Lyla can still be heard in the background, describing the power surge and following up on Slade.

They have a plan, of sorts, or at least a path to follow. And that, in itself, is somewhat settling.

Right up until his mother clears her throat, anyhow, and drags his attention over to her.

"If you're quite done, Oliver," Moira says. "Might I have a word?"

She's covered in powdery remnants of concrete. Her normally immaculate clothing is rumpled and torn, her hair a mess. And yet his mother somehow manages to hold herself with an authority that makes him feel a bit like a little boy playing dress-up. He hates it. He's always hated that, but especially now.

"This is hardly the time," he tells her.

"It's exactly the time," she counters in a no-nonsense tone that makes him feel like he's being reprimanded.

"Fine," Oliver snaps, ignoring that he sounds exactly like the petulant

child she's treating him like. "What is it you want to talk about? How you went and tried to root out Isabel's plan without running it past me?"

"I don't owe you any explanations," she replies, ice edging her words. "I have been playing politics with the board since before you were in diapers and that isn't about to stop just because you're a grown man with aims of his own. You should have come to me."

The huff of laughter he lets out is one of sheer disbelief. He barely registers the way Felicity's eyes dart between them as if she's watching a tennis match and Sara bites her lips together to keep in a disbelieving chuckle.

"I should have come to *you*?" he asks. "I don't need my mother's permission to try and counter Isabel Rochev when she's trying to tear my city apart at the seams."

"Perhaps not," Moira says. "But if you were smart about it you'd be using the resources at your disposal and you'd be well aware that this vendetta of hers predates you by a lot, Oliver." He bites the tip of his tongue, nearly drawing blood, both at her tone and words. "Our goals in this aligned entirely and yet we got in each other's way instead of helping one another."

"You shouldn't even be involved!"

"Don't be so naive. I've been involved since well before you knew this battle even existed. Ms. Rochev's designs on *my* family's company - my *husband's* company - have very little to do with you. You're a speed bump in her path. You can hardly see the whole road, Oliver."

To say he doesn't take her beratement well is something of an understatement. Oliver's blood boils at her words, her dismissal of him. His hands clench tightly enough that his knuckles turn white as he presses them against the green leather at his thighs and he grits his teeth in frustration.

"You know," Oliver bites out. "It's funny how you've had a hand in almost every single thing threatening this city since the moment I got back."

"Don't you *dare* throw that back at me," Moira says, her voice rising for the first time as she raises a warning finger. "Everything I've done - everything I've *ever* done - was to protect my family and its legacy."

"Even when it's at the expense of others," Oliver notes derisively.

"Yes," she announces unapologetically. "*Yes*. And don't you dare tell me you wouldn't do the same. Don't pretend there isn't anything you wouldn't do to protect your child."

"I would not plot to murder thousands of people," Oliver snaps. "Not even for Ellie."

There's an unsettling moment of silence as Moira lets those words sink in.

"I don't believe you." Moira stares at him. "I don't even think you believe yourself."

Truth be told, he's not sure he does. He's killed people for a whole lot less. And that is so beside the point.

"Oliver, we need to be smarter than this." She steps forward until she's only a few feet in front of him. "We have the resources we need to defeat Isabel *and* Blood, but we need to use them wisely because she will surely use every advantage she has to lead us to ruin."

"Well…" Felicity mutters quietly from the side. "Woman scorned and all that."

For the rest of his days, as hard as he tries, Oliver will never quite manage to forget the way the blood drains from his mother's face and how she recoils, her eyes snapping to Felicity.

"How did you…" Moira starts, eyes darting between her and Oliver. "There's no way you could possibly have known about that."

"Wait, what?" Felicity asks in confusion before her eyes widen as something clicks into place. "Are you saying…"

"I'm not saying anything," Moira replies cooly. The underlying hostility masks an uncharacteristic vulnerability as she stares at Felicity. "What are *you* saying?"

"Nothing," Felicity snaps quickly, shaking her head. "I'm saying nothing. I'm saying what you were saying. I'm actually going to stop saying words entirely. Right now. I'm stopping right now."

She doesn't look at him. And that, in itself, is very telling these days. But it still takes Oliver a moment to suss out entirely what their

exchange meant exactly. When he does, when his mind catches up with their words and he works it out the only way it makes sense…

He feels like he might be about to throw up.

"Are you telling me that Dad…" Oliver starts, but the words to finish his question turn to ash on his tongue. He's completely unable to finish his train of thought as bile rises up in the back of his throat.

Moira takes two solid steps back, a look of sheer horror on her face as she looks at him, her eyes wide and disbelieving. She's made her own connections.

"*Oliver*." She shakes her head. "Please tell me you have considerably more sense than to… than to…"

She can't even finish her sentence, but her lack of denial is enough to serve as proof of his assumption… just as his lack of denial is for her.

A wave of nausea rolls through him and he blinks unseeingly as he stumbles back a step, right into Felicity's desk.

Oliver's had a lot of casual sex over the years. There's never been any doubt that his encounter with Isabel had been ill-advised, but he'd completely underestimated precisely how bad an idea it was until now.

He'd slept with his father's ex-mistress.

He really thinks he might be sick.

"Oh *wow* is this awkward," Felicity breathes out. "Let's just all pretend the last five minutes didn't happen, okay? I know I'm going to."

"Oliver Jonas Queen," his mother hisses. "That *goddamned* woman is poison. I will not have her doing any more damage to my family than she's already done, do you understand me?"

He nods numbly, gulping heavily. He lets out a long exhale that does very little to settle him.

"This ends with her in the ground," Moira says, her voice quiet enough that there's no chance Ellie can hear. "Am I clear? *That woman* has taken entirely too much from me. I want my company back and I want her dead."

Her words are enough to slice through the shock filling his chest

cavity. He blinks, his mother's demands playing through his head.

Without thinking, he looks toward Felicity, his vision clearing some as he takes her in. He's made a vow not to kill anymore, to honor Tommy's memory, but he's aware enough of the ever-present dangers around them - from the present and future - to know that can't be a hard and fast rule. He doesn't trust himself to be objective on this, though, and he trusts his mother even less.

So he looks to Felicity.

And she nods.

"Isabel and Slade both, Oliver," Felicity confirms. "This doesn't end until they're gone. And we need it to end. For us. And for Ellie."

"Well…"

A voice Oliver hadn't expected fills the lair, jolting him into awareness and putting him on edge all at once.

"Isn't this the lovely little Queen family moment."

The sound of Lyla and Digg's guns cocking and the swish of Sara's bo slicing through the air into a defensive position are immediate. Oliver's bow is in his hand, an arrow nocked and aimed before he's even realizes he's picked the weapon up.

"I have to say, I approve of your future wife, Oliver. She has fire. And common sense."

The air drains from the room and Oliver wonders for a long moment if he's seeing things. Because this doesn't make *sense*. It's not even possible. He has to be hallucinating because there's no other explanation that works.

Because Malcolm Merlyn is dead.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> A few quick notes... First off, just as a reminder, we update Monday mornings weekly at approximately 6 am Pacific time. If that ever is not going to be the case, we'll let you know ahead of time (barring emergency or massive computer failure). Secondly, we've fallen horribly behind on replying to comments and it's pretty clear we can never catch up entirely. Response to this is fantastically overwhelming. Rather than go back and reply to things said a month or two ago, we are going to make an effort to reply to comments that include questions in them going forward. Please know (even if we don't reply to you) that we absolutely love the encouraging comments we get and you absolutely have our thanks. ~Janis and Bre

Malcolm Merlyn is supposed to be dead.

A sharp stab of panicked disbelief hits her chest as Felicity stands. It's quickly followed by confusion and then a weird numbness as the man in question steps out of the shadows - no, he *melts* out of the shadows, if that's even a thing. More like *slinks*. Like he was part of them and only just now wanted them to see him.

That creep factor is way beyond her level of comprehension at the moment.

Felicity expects the way Oliver steps forward, placing himself solidly between Malcolm and everyone else, as if he can simultaneously protect everyone at once by the sheer force of his presence. That part is predictable. Routine, even. So are Diggle and Sara and Lyla's guarded reactions. They're like a pack of wolves acting in concert, surrounding their prey. She doesn't even blink because that's what they all do: protect.

What she doesn't expect, though, the wild card in all of this… is Ellie.

"You *stay away* from my momma!"

Her little voice comes out in a high pitched shriek of hysteria that makes Felicity jump even as her stomach drops. And then a little blur of toddler is rushing in front of her. Her gasp echoes Oliver's sharp, "Ellie!" as Felicity scrambles to grab hold of her, to pull her back, to

keep her well outside of Merlyn's reach, but there's no need. Ellie isn't aiming to go toe-to-toe with Malcolm Merlyn.

No, she wants to stand protectively in front of her mother.

"Bad, bad, *bad* man!" Ellie accuses, red-faced and full of fury, her little fists balled up and her eyes shiny with heavy tears. "Go away right now. You don't get to hurt my momma again. No more Sad Eyes. They're all done!"

The strangest mixture of terror, affection and horror washes over Felicity as she grips Ellie's shoulders to pull the little girl back further, her three-year-old who stands in her defense. *Sad Eyes.* Felicity can't pretend to have any idea what happens to her in the future, but Ellie's words to Oliver from weeks ago ring loudly in her ears - "*You got Sad Eyes, like when momma was sleeping after that bad man got in her room."* Oliver must remember, too, because the tension radiating off him quadruples. His grip on his bowstring tightens as he steps in front of her and Ellie both.

He's going to shoot. Felicity knows it with every fiber of her being. This is The Count all over to him. And there's even less of a choice to make this time.

Until Moira steps between them.

Oliver could shoot past his mother - the gesture is more symbolic than anything else - but her presence in his line-of-sight is enough to jolt him.

"*Move*," he orders his mother, murderous intent clear in his voice.

"Oliver…" Moira says warily, raising her hands as if to placate him as he continues to hold the bowstring tight. It hits Felicity that the older woman isn't the least bit fazed - there's no surprise or horror or concern.

"You knew?" Oliver asks, voicing Felicity's realization. "You knew he was alive and you said nothing?" He grits his teeth, his voice a weapon itself as he snaps, "And then you have the nerve to talk to me about being smart and working together?"

"We had more than enough on our plates already," Moira defends. "We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted from the threats at hand."

"He *is* the threat at hand at the moment," Oliver argues.

"Not today," Moira counters.

That is the *very* last thing he wants to hear. The entire room seems to darken right along with him as Oliver's voice lowers even more, falling right in line with his voice modulator. "Mom, *move*. I will not let him hurt Felicity."

"But he hasn't hurt her, Oliver," Moira replies. Felicity honestly doesn't know how to feel about this - the future is still unknown, despite the facts Ellie drops left and right. Moira's not *wrong*. Oliver doesn't seem to care though. He shakes his head in exasperation, opening his mouth to argue, but Moira cuts him off. "And he may not. You can't condemn him for things he hasn't done yet."

"Watch me," Oliver growls in return.

"He's your sister's father, Oliver," Moira points out, switching tactics. It works - Oliver jerks again, his eyes slipping shut briefly at her words. When he opens them again, his glare still cuts through her, but his intent has slipped.

"You're defending me?" Malcolm asks, surprise-laced amusement filling his voice. Ellie shudders at the sound of his voice. "Moira, I'm touched. I didn't think you still cared."

It does absolutely *nothing* to help his case, and Felicity's one hundred percent sure he doesn't care. She confirms that when Malcolm's eyes slip to Oliver, a tiny smirk on his lips. The blatant disrespect has Oliver clenching his teeth and he moves to step around his mother. With a whisper of his name, Felicity reaches out to grab his arm, but she pulls her hand back at the last second, her fingers simply grazing his injured arm - she's not sure if she wants to stop him or encourage him. She's sure his instincts are screaming at him to end the threat in their midst, but he still stops himself, barely. His bow groans under the pressure of his hold, and not even the whisper-touch of her fingers against his skin deters his focus as he meets Malcolm's gaze head-on, looking even more homicidal than before.

"Don't kid yourself, Malcolm," Moira replies, glancing over her shoulder. "I've never cared. Not about you. But I do care about my daughter. And she deserves answers from you that she'll never get if you're dead. So, Oliver..." She looks back toward her son. "You *will not* kill your sister's father. Not if you want to have any hope of ever repairing your relationship with Thea."

It's only by invoking Thea's name that Moira gets through to her son,

Felicity's certain of it. And yet, despite that, she's not entirely sure he's swayed. Oliver stands stock-still, his aim unwavering. It's a long - *very long* - moment before his muscles finally relent, and it's only then that Felicity lets herself take a breath. She's been trying to force Ellie to bury her face against her thigh, to shield the little girl from seeing her father kill someone, but thankfully that doesn't appear to be an imminent threat because Ellie has proven surprisingly squirmy and stubbornly unwilling to allow Malcolm out of her sight.

"My daddy's gonna make you pay, bad man," she hisses between her teeth with more anger than Felicity would have thought possible from her. Ellie doesn't flinch in the least as she locks eyes with Malcolm. He is a mass murderer, a member of the League of Assassins and quite possibly the worst excuse for a human being that Felicity's ever met… and her three-year-old is fully prepared to try to hold him accountable for that all on her own.

Her daughter's intensity is both incredibly remarkable and downright terrifying, so much so that tears burn Felicity's eyes.

"Charming little girl you have there, Oliver," Malcolm says, fully proving that he's lacking even a smidgen of common sense because, honestly, if Oliver had been on the verge of killing him *before* he commented on Ellie, Felicity can't even begin to imagine the sort of restraint he's showing now. "I can tell there's a lot of you in her." His smile is cold as he adds, "You might want to see to that. It's likely to get her into trouble."

Oliver's anger explodes off him in a vicious wave, making Felicity tighten with dread-filled anticipation.

"You're trying even my resolve to keep you alive, Malcolm," Moira warns him, and for the first time since his arrival, the threat is evident in her voice. Malcolm raises a sardonic eyebrow. "And I'm the only thing approaching an ally you have here."

"I believe you're all looking at this backwards," Malcolm replies loftily, with the kind of arrogance Felicity has come to expect from him. "I'm an asset and we share a certain… sense of purpose."

"Unless you've suddenly grown a conscience and that sense of purpose is seeing yourself behind bars," Felicity grits out, "I highly doubt that."

"Now, now, Ms. Smoak…" Merlyn drawls, eyeing her like one might a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of their shoe. "It seems to me that you have a great deal to lose. It would probably be in your best

interests to not overplay your hand. For your own sake. And for your daughter's."

The arrow's loose before Felicity can blink. She doesn't hear Oliver move, doesn't hear his bow tighten or hear the sharp 'thwick' of it releasing. It's only when Malcolm jerks that she knows something happened, and in the space of that second he's spinning, grabbing something midair. An arrow. Oliver's arrow. There's a glimpse of red at the tip and when Malcolm looks back at Oliver, she sees the slice on his cheek. It's a garish contrast to the man's clean-lined business suit and overcoat.

Moira's whispered, "*Oliver*," highlights Felicity's gasp as she spins to look at Oliver. His eyes are narrowed in a glare that makes her shiver.

"Impressive, Oliver," Malcolm says.

Oliver's already talking over him, "If you even *think* about laying a hand on either one of them…"

"You'll what?" Malcolm interrupts. He drops the arrow dismissively, the one that very well might have landed in his eye if he hadn't moved. Oliver wouldn't do that though, it had to be a warning shot. But it'd been so *close*. Felicity's not entirely sure - it'd happened too fast. Malcolm wipes away the blood on his cheek as if it's merely dirt as he continues, "Fail to kill me all over again? We both know you can't beat me."

"Maybe I just lacked the proper motivation before."

It's terrifying how much the sheen in Malcolm's eyes looks like pride. Felicity's positive she's not the only one spotting this, as she catches the way Moira shudders subtly from a few feet away.

"Perhaps," Malcolm acknowledges. "All the same, I'm not here to fight you, Oliver. Not today."

"Then why *are* you here?" Oliver demands.

"Thea, of course," Malcolm responds immediately, as though it were obvious. And, really, maybe it should have been.

"I haven't heard from her in weeks," Oliver replies. Felicity doesn't miss the touch of hesitance in his voice. "And even if I had, I wouldn't be inviting you into her life."

"I've been in her life from the start," Malcolm says. "I'm her father."

"Not in any way that matters," Oliver retorts with gritted teeth. Moira visibly pales, looking unsteady, but she stands her ground. "Her father died when you sabotaged his boat. He patched up scraped knees and came to her dance recital in the third grade and hung her preschool artwork up in his office. Robert Queen was her father. And you murdered him. You're nothing but a sperm donor."

"Oliver," Moira protests, her voice shakier and weaker than Felicity can remember having ever heard it. It's painfully obvious that this is a battle she hadn't readied herself for, and that only becomes more evident when she freezes as Malcolm's entire demeanor *shifts*.

He closes in on Oliver, invading his personal space and Felicity's grip instinctively tightens on Ellie, stepping them both backwards as Malcolm's hold on sanity and civility loosens dangerously.

"I'm going to forgive that comment just this once," Malcolm warns. "Because you're clearly projecting your own recent experiences with parenthood and relating with your father in a way that really doesn't quite line up. But, despite whatever you might think, I *am* Thea's father and you *will* help me find her."

It's the wording more than anything else that diffuses the moment.

"What do you mean 'help you find her?'" Oliver questions.

"Precisely what it sounds like, Oliver," Malcolm replies, his tone patronizing.

"She's taking some time for herself," Oliver informs him. "She's upset and she needs some space."

"She's in the wind," Merlyn counters, drawing out each word and over-pronouncing them all. "She's my *daughter*. Do you honestly think I haven't been watching her every move?"

Felicity bites her tongue to keep from saying that that's less of a parental move and more of a stalker's. It would be true, of course, but it's also equivalent to throwing gasoline on a fire. So instead, she scoops Ellie up into the safety of her embrace, putting more space between them and Malcolm. The toddler instantly clings to her, winding her arms around Felicity's neck. Her glare never once leaves Merlyn's face.

"I can't find her," Malcolm continues, ignoring both Felicity and Ellie in favor of appealing to Oliver. "And, believe me, that's saying something."

Oliver frowns. "She doesn't want to be found," he replies. The surety in his voice is shaken when his eyes dart to his very, very nervous mother.

"Thea isn't like us, Oliver," Malcolm says, making Felicity flinch at the notion that the two men have *anything* in common other than Thea. "Oh, I have no doubt that she has the potential for greatness, but right now she's a teenage girl with a love for Prada and an unhealthy reliance on a limitless credit card. She's never had to fend for herself in her entire life. Do you honestly think she could hide from *me*?"

There is absolutely no level on which Malcolm's assertions are not terrifying. The notion that Malcolm Merlyn believes her to have the 'potential for greatness' is damn near unfathomable, but their immediate concern has to focus on the fact that he's *right* - there's no possible way that Thea could hide from Malcolm if he was trying to find her. Thea isn't Roy. She didn't grow up on the streets. She's only selectively self-reliant and it's not like she has the skills or experience to slip through Malcolm's grasp for weeks on end.

"When?" Moira demands, stepping up to the two men. She grabs Malcolm's sleeve with a painful sort of desperation that has Felicity holding Ellie just a bit closer. "When was the last time you saw her?"

Malcolm pauses. He watches Moira, soaking in the muted sense of panic that she's doing very little to mask, and for a moment, he almost looks sympathetic. It's jarring. Felicity hadn't thought him capable.

"Twelve days ago," Malcolm replies finally and Moira stumbles backwards with her hand over her mouth.

"Oliver," she implores, like just saying his name might fix things.

It can't, of course. Oliver's as lost as her. But he, at least, has people to turn to.

He doesn't say anything as he looks to Felicity. He doesn't have to. His eyes say it all for him. He's terrified for his baby sister. It's obvious Malcolm's presence alone has unsettled him, but the man's assertions about Thea threaten to rattle him to his very core. It's a look she'll never say no to.

"Digg, take Ellie?" Felicity asks. Diggle nods, immediately closing the distance between them. She hands the toddler off to him. He cradles Ellie protectively against his chest with one arm, the other still holding his gun trained on Merlyn. She'd known he would. Digg trusts Malcolm about as much as she does, which is not at all.

Her daughter cared for, Felicity heads back to her computers, pausing long enough to squeeze Oliver's arm before starting an entirely new search. It shouldn't be hard, especially because Thea isn't the craftiest at eluding attention. As her fingers fly over her keyboard, she pushes down the niggle of guilt - this all should have been obvious *weeks* ago. Despite the press hounding them, there hasn't been a whisper about Thea. Surely the media had tried to get her take on the Ellie situation. Her absence alone should have been a clue. Maybe if they hadn't been so wrapped up in the dangers of Isabel and Blood and the ever-looming threat of Zoom.

Maybe if they hadn't been quite so taken with Ellie, with each other…

But no. She can't let herself think that way. Hadn't she *just* lectured Oliver about blaming himself for things beyond his control? About living in the past?

The problem is that it's a lot easier to dole out that advice than to take it to heart.

She shoves down her doubts, her regrets, and focuses on the screen in front of her. Thea needs her. Oliver needs her. And this is something she can do for both of them.

"Felicity," Oliver's voice ventures from behind her. She hates the tone of his voice right now, the broken quality of it.

"I'm searching," she assures him, because that's the closest thing she can say to what he wants to hear. She refuses to tell him she can't find his sister. She doesn't even let herself *think* the words. Failure on this is not an option. "When's the last time you saw her?"

The question isn't directed at Oliver. She knows when he saw Thea last - at Verdant, when she'd run away from them and Ellie, her confusion and anger chasing after her - but if Malcolm had been keeping tabs on her, he'd seen her later.

"Are you asking me, Miss Smoak?" Malcolm asks, and the condescension in his voice is enough to make Felicity whip around and glare at him.

"No," she snaps, "I'm asking the other Darth Vader imposter in the room. Of course I'm asking you."

She's greeted with a warning look from Malcolm. Oliver's lips twitch with amusement despite the horrible circumstances, something she counts as a win on several fronts.

Whether or not Malcolm is actually going to answer her is anyone's guess until Moira's voice breaks through the heavy quiet of the room.

"Malcolm," she implores, gripping his sleeve with alarming intensity. "*Please*."

There has never been any doubt that the driving force behind all of Moira Queen's actions has been her children, and never has the truth of that been more obvious to Felicity than right now. The Queen matriarch's hand shakes as she clenches her fingers into the dark blue coat of her one-time lover's sleeve as she looks up at him with watery, pleading eyes. An entire conversation seems to go on between them - completely unspoken and unintelligible to everyone but them.

It's been nearly twenty years since their affair and, while no one has ever been under the illusion that whatever relationship the two of them had carried on was either healthy or borne of love, Felicity's surprised to note it's not entirely comprised of hate either. Even now, decades later, after he's had her husband murdered, second husband kidnapped, son left for dead and gotten her embroiled in a plot to commit mass murder for which she stood trial, Felicity is pretty damned sure that there's still *something* there between Moira Queen and Malcolm Merlyn.

Maybe that's just due to the length and complexity of their relationship. It's probably because of that. But, all the same, there's a strange sort of intimacy to the way she holds his sleeve and he looks down at her in quiet contemptation. It's hard to watch. It's undoubtedly harder for *Oliver* to see. The way he shuffles his feet and the muscle in his cheek jumps as he clenches his jaw is proof enough to Felicity that she's not the only one who's picked up on the layers being conveyed between his mother and his sister's father.

The silence extends for what feels like an eternity - a really, really freaky eternity - before the reality of where she is comes back to Moira. She suddenly straightens, pulling her shoulders back as she takes a steadying breath. Her eyes never waver though, not once.

"You came to us for help, Malcolm," Moira reminds him. She smoothes

over his wrinkled sleeve, but leaves her hand on his forearm. "So allow us to help you."

Another lengthy moment of quiet passes. Everyone in the room can see the wheels turning in Malcolm's head, although his face gives nothing away.

"I'd been unaware that you were *in the know* about your son's extracurricular activities," he finally says, his voice soft. It's disquieting. "Much less part of his merry band of misfits."

Oliver's eye twitches and he visibly resists the urge to raise his bow again, especially when Malcolm rotates his arm until his hand is cupping Moira's elbow. It's not intimate. It's *not*. And yet… somehow it is.

It sort of makes Felicity's skin feel like it's crawling, yet she can't look away.

"As the next mayor of this city," Moira starts, her lips lifting in a signature smile that tells the world she's entirely in control of the conversation, "it's very much in my best interests to keep myself in the loop when it comes to the Arrow's activities."

As if being here had been her idea in any way at all.

"You have always been… delightfully ambitious, Moira," Malcolm tells her. "It's one of your more enchanting qualities."

It's absolutely terrifying to note that there's something approaching affection in his voice.

"*Okay*," Felicity over-pronounces far too loudly, making Moira startle in response. "Can we like… come back from the Twilight Zone and/or fast-forward from 1995 back to 2014, please? Thea. Where and when did you last see her?"

"Shortly after your press conference," Malcolm advises. The change in his attitude is audible. He's kept his hand on Moira's elbow - probably because he's quietly enjoying the way Oliver's eye keeps darting to it, his mouth twisted with sourness - and for reasons that surely defy Felicity's understanding, Moira hasn't moved away. "She watched it from her street rat ex-boyfriend's house, though he hasn't been around for quite some time. Thankfully."

"Thea watched it?" Oliver asks, something finally cutting through the

haze of strained disbelief at his mother's unsettling closeness with Malcolm Merlyn. "She saw what we said?"

"Yes," Malcolm confirms. "And she didn't believe it any more than I do, though I sincerely doubt she has the world experience to realize time travel is a viable explanation. She knows you're lying to her, and she's confused, angry. It's a terrible combination for anyone, but an especially bad one for Thea."

Oliver doesn't respond, but Felicity can see the subtle way his shoulders deflate. She knows he's thinking about the morning Thea had been at the Manor, when Moira had suggested they tell her everything. And he hadn't wanted to.

It makes her want to pick up that arrow and poke Merlyn in the eye.

"So how'd she lose you?" Felicity asks, bypassing all of Malcolm's baiting and cutting straight to the point. "If she's just a nineteen-year-old Prada-lover and you're all League of Assassin mass murdering psychopath, how'd she slip your tail?"

She's more than goading him, and she really doesn't care, even when Malcolm's sharp eyes fall on her.

"Felicity," Oliver says in a hushed voice, edging closer to her with a warning look.

"Perhaps I spoke too soon in praising your common sense, Miss Smoak," Malcolm bites out.

Moira steps away from him at his words and the look he sends her way is one of genuine annoyance at the distance. Moira returns his gaze steadily, and once again a silent conversation passes between them, one she really wants to never be privy to. Still, it seems to lighten the air in the lair. Oliver finally takes a deep breath, almost like he hadn't been able to since Malcolm showed up. That's another win in her book, regardless of the fact that she's purposefully antagonizing an actual mad man. He just really deserves it.

"Look," Felicity says, "I have street cameras from around Roy's place that night all loaded up. So we can either sit here and debate over whether or not your opinion on my common sense has any ironic weight at all, or we can look for Thea. One of those options gives you what you want. The other leaves you - at best - kicked out of here. So, I mean, if we're talking common sense…"

There's no mistaking the threatening step that Malcolm takes toward her. Not for Oliver, who swiftly puts himself between them, and not for Ellie who lets out an angry protest from Diggle's arms.

"No! *No*!" Ellie yells, practically throwing herself from Digg's grasp as she pitches herself toward her mother. "You stay away! *Momma*!"

"Ellie, careful," Diggle advises sharply as he struggles to keep hold of the wiggling child, but ultimately it's useless. She's too determined. He has to lower her to the ground rather than drop her as she wildly tosses herself in her mother's direction. Felicity's pretty certain that he intends to holster his gun and grab the toddler again, but Ellie's too fast for that. She zips across the room and barrels straight into her mother, climbing up onto her lap at the computer and clinging to her like a lifeline as she glares daggers at Malcolm.

It was shocking the first time, although it'd been colored more by fear of what Malcolm would do if she'd thrown herself at him, but this time it's even worse. She's normally so even-keeled, such a reasonable child. It makes her reaction all the more terrifying.

"Ellie…" she starts, but her daughter only holds her tighter, desperate eyes finding Oliver.

"Daddy, make him go away," she begs. "He needs to go *away*."

Oliver's face crumples for a split second before he regains his composure. "Ellie, I… I can't. Not right now." Felicity feels Ellie withdrawing, and she looks down to see angry hurt on their daughter's face. Felicity holds her closer, her eyes finding Oliver's helplessly. He bites the tip of his tongue, and she can see the war within him. But ultimately… "Baby, he's your Aunt Thea's dad. He's here to help us find her."

"That doesn't make him good!" Ellie insists. She is *so* not wrong. "He has to go away! I don't want no more Sad Eyes!"

"Ellie," Oliver whispers, taking a step towards them.

It's telling when instead of reaching for him as she usually would, Ellie instead turns into Felicity. She digs her face into Felicity's chest, clearly upset, not only with the situation but with her father and his lack of action. The hurt that flashes over Oliver's face is like a stab to Felicity's heart. With a frustrated noise, Ellie resettles, her eyes finding Malcolm again. The unadulterated ire reflected on the toddler's face is distressing, to both Oliver and Felicity.

The display is clearly trying Malcolm's patience as he huffs and rolls his eyes. He returns Ellie's look, appraising her - more sizing her up as he realizes he's going to have to barter with a three-year-old for acceptance. It'd be funny under other circumstances, Felicity thinks.

"Would it help if I promise I am not here to hurt you or your mommy?" Malcolm asks. It's an odd credit to him that he doesn't alter his voice in any way - he speaks like he's talking to Felicity or Oliver. "I'm only here to help your Aunt Thea. *My* daughter."

"No," Ellie replies immediately, narrowing her eyes at him in accusation. "Because you tell lies."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you or your mom," Oliver reminds her. "You *know* that." Ellie's brow furrows, in dislike, not disagreement. When she doesn't turn away from him again, he takes full advantage. Oliver moves in, crouching down to her level before Felicity. "But, Ellie-bug, he was the last person to see Aunt Thea and we think she might be in trouble. We really need his help to find her right now."

That's enough to give Ellie pause. For a moment, Felicity thinks it might even have worked and both her and Oliver hold their breath, waiting… But then she shakes her head forcefully, springy blonde curls whipping around her face.

"*No*, Daddy," she counters. "You *promised*. You told me the bad man wasn't ever coming back. You said you made it so he couldn't ever come near me or Momma again!"

Everyone pauses at that. The implications are vast. Does Oliver really kill Malcolm one day? Is that what Ellie's telling them, in her own way?

Malcolm's shrewd eyes glance toward Oliver with newfound wariness. "Did he now?" he drawls.

And Oliver… poor Oliver. He's faced with a distrusting Malcolm Merlyn and his little girl accusing him of breaking a promise he has yet to make. There's no winning this. The struggle is evident on his face, his eyes never leaving Ellie's. He never, ever, *ever* wants to let her down, Felicity knows it's the last thing he wants to do. But he's going to have to, right now. And Ellie knows it.

Felicity's hand itches to cup Oliver's cheek, to tell him it's okay, but now's not the time.

There is something she can do though.

"Ellie," Felicity forces out, her voice catching. She places her finger under Ellie's chin, urging her to turn and look her in the eye. "It's okay, sweetie."

"But, Momma…" Ellie starts, wrapping her hands around her mother's wrist and looking up at her with wide, imploring eyes. It's painfully obvious that her daughter just wants to protect her and that makes it a little hard to breathe for a second.

"No, my sweet girl," Felicity says, shaking her head, injecting more certainty and levity into her voice than she really feels. "Daddy promised he would keep us safe. And he will."

"But before..." Ellie hesitates, casting a glance toward Malcolm before looking back toward Felicity fearfully. Tears make her voice unsteady as she says, "He made you be asleep for a *whole week*. An' Daddy cried lots and Aunt Thea told Uncle Roy they didn't know if Nathaniel would even get to be born and I don't like the bad man, Momma, I don't like him! I want him to go away forever like Daddy promised."

The picture she paints is horrifically vivid. At some point, Oliver's hand had drifted down to cup her knee, hard. Felicity has to exert considerable effort to fake a smile for her daughter's sake even as she nearly chokes on her own tongue. Oliver's touch does nothing to buoy her sense of confidence right now. The idea that she spends a week in a coma while pregnant with a child who might not make it to term as her husband and toddler sit terrified by her side is… it's big. Really big. And completely *terrifying*.

A huge part of her wants to melt into him at the touch of his fingers as he slides his hand up to rest on her thigh, gripping her tightly - it's as much for her as it is for him. But they don't have the luxury of falling apart right now. And despite the way Oliver blows air through his thinned lips, his face tight with a grief he hasn't felt yet, he knows that too. That doesn't stop his pained eyes from pleading with her for a reassurance she can't possibly give him.

Felicity sniffles, biting the inside of her lip to get ahold of her emotions. She sits up a little taller, blinking a thin layer of tears from her eyes.

"But Nate is okay and so am I, right?" she says gently.

"Yeah…" Ellie agrees, voice wary like she senses she's walking into a

trap of logic.

"And that happens a long time from now," Felicity points out. "You aren't even born here yet, remember? There's no baby Ellie around here. Just my big girl Ellie. Right?"

"I guess," Ellie ventures.

"So I have to be okay right now, right?" Felicity asks. "Because I'm not even your Mommy yet. And we know there's an Ellie later, so nothing really bad can happen to me now."

Ellie quirks her head to the side as she tries to puzzle that through. Her brows slowly draw together, and with each second that passes, her grip relaxes, like the task of unraveling the tangled mess that is time travel is enough to distract her. It should, because it is for Felicity, who turns her own words over in her head.

"Is that how it works?" Ellie asks after a moment.

Felicity's mouth forms a little 'o' at that because really, damned if she knows. She can talk cybersecurity and computer operating systems until she's blue in the face, but her time travel knowledge is mostly limited to Doctor Who and a handful of Star Trek movies. Calling it theoretical would be generous.

Ellie's looking at her, waiting for an answer. And despite the huge blank being drawn up in her head, this feels so much easier to address than anything Malcolm-related.

Until the man himself speaks, drawing everyone's attention back to him.

"Time wants to happen, Miss Queen," Malcolm says, answering in Felicity's place, jarring her from her thoughts. Ellie's attention snaps back to him as her grip around Felicity's neck tightens again. "And while it might not be set entirely, there are some events that are unchangeable… At least without very serious consequences, that is."

Felicity's frowns at him for a moment. He'd been thoroughly unsurprised at Ellie's presence, accepting the notion of time travel like someone who accepted the sun rose and set every day. He'd even implied he'd had some experience with it before. Is what he's saying now true? Can she honestly believe that? Can she believe *anything* coming out of Malcolm Merlyn's mouth?

No. Probably not.

Dismissing him, she turns back to Ellie, urging her to look back at her. Her gorgeous blue eyes find hers, and when Felicity smiles this time, it's real and she knows it reaches her eyes.

"You and me, kiddo? We're safe," Felicity promises her daughter. She gestures at the room, adding, "There's a whole room full of people here who refuse to let anything happen to us, no matter what the threat is. And that includes Daddy."

Oliver's hand tightens on her thigh in response, but he otherwise stays silent, watching their exchange with soft eyes. There's a tinge of sadness there too, but they can't do anything about that until they're home.

"Okay, Ellie-bug?" Felicity prompts.

Ellie does not like this conclusion. She's mistrusting of it - not of her father's ability to keep her safe, or those she loves, but of Malcolm Merlyn himself, which implies she's had far more experience with him than Felicity would like for her child. Honestly, Felicity can't blame her. But for the moment Merlyn is useful and, beyond that, Moira had been right - if Oliver has any hope of repairing his relationship with his sister, he really can't kill her father.

"Okay," Ellie says, so softly Felicity almost doesn't catch it. But Oliver does and he lets out a breath she didn't realize he'd been holding. His thumb rubs gentle circles on her thigh, and Felicity shoots him a tiny reassuring smile - one that he returns, albeit less reassured - before turning back to their daughter.

"Okay," Felicity confirms. "That's my brave girl."

"But I'm gonna stay with you, Momma," Ellie announces. Her little fingers grab at Felicity's top to pull herself up a bit as she turns to glare daggers at Malcolm. "'Til *he* goes away."

"Fine," Merlyn says on an exasperated sigh. His annoyance rolls off him in waves and he completely ignores Felicity's dark look as he addresses her earlier question. "Thea left Harper's place in a cab. She made an effort to slip some reporters. She's surprisingly good at it. It must be a natural skill. I lost her somewhere downtown in a sea of taxis. But if I know my daughter, she was heading to confront you, Oliver."

That's too easy bait to take and, for once, Felicity lets it slide by - she has more important things to focus on.

Oliver barely spares the man a glance as he stands, his eyes still glued on them. Just like earlier when it'd just been her and Oliver, it's now just their little family, the rest of the room fading for the moment. He smoothes down Ellie's hair and the toddler merely looks up at him. It's obvious she hasn't *quite* forgiven him just yet, but she doesn't pull away from his touch either. He offers her a smile, one she returns a little half-heartedly. Hurt and regret flash over his face before he looks at Felicity. The smile he offers her is lined with gratitude for the earlier save. He gives her a quick, chaste kiss. She can feel the hesitance in his movements, like he wants to linger, but he forces himself away, stepping back.

That's for later, after they find Thea, hopefully safe and sound - and oh, what if she found Roy? Although that doesn't make Felicity feel any better since she can't exactly find Roy either at the moment - and after they get Malcolm Merlyn out of their lives. *Again*.

Felicity turns back to her computers, taking Ellie with her.

It's terribly inconvenient to do any kind of work on the computer with a three-year-old literally clinging to her neck, but Felicity quickly finds she sort of likes it anyhow. Ellie adores her father. There's a bond there that Felicity sometimes finds herself just sitting back and watching in awe. She gets it. Really, she does. She adores Oliver too. But all the same, this is the first time she's had Ellie so wholly focused on *her* and it's surprisingly moving to feel her little girl's devotion honed in on her entirely.

"I'm running facial recognition software programs on anything I can find from the last two weeks," Felicity tells them. "Street cameras, dash cams, security feeds, whatever." She glances at Oliver as she adds, "The house, because you never know. We'll find where she went."

"How long will it take?" Oliver asks, shoving his hands in his pockets. She can tell by the way his muscles flex he's making fists. She can't blame him for feeling antsy. His sister has always meant the world to him and the idea that she might be out there right now, needing him... Well, that would be enough to drive Oliver half-crazy. The not having any idea whatsoever part doesn't help either. She'll find Thea. She *will*. She'll find footage from a bus station depot or a traffic camera or a security feed at a 7-11. Through hard work and sheer force of will,

she'll make it happen… somehow. But miracles take time.

"For a full scan?" Felicity winces. "Probably a few hours." He makes a tiny strangled noise in his throat and she glances at him for a quick second to find him staring at the rapid flashes of various cameras across her computer screens. She absently shifts Ellie slightly, centering her so she can type faster. "But I might be able to get you some early results in the next few minutes. I put a priority on that day at locations we frequent… Verdant, the manor, your mom's campaign office. If she really was trying to come talk to you, we'll find her pretty quickly."

Each minute that passes is like molasses. Her focus is entirely on the screens in front of her, even with Ellie on her lap and Oliver moving to hover just behind her. The tension rolling off him is so tangible she feels like it's spilling over onto her. At least she can *do* something, she has a task she can pound her frustrations into. He could go hit something, but she knows why he doesn't. And it's not like they can sneak off for… something entirely un-family friendly. Felicity pushes *that* away because now is so not the time. And his standing *right there,* probably glowering at the lack of results by now, isn't helping,. She can only imagine what the growing stress is doing to his already bruised and battered body. He's *really* going to need a massage later. His muscles are going to be hard as rocks. And that's… Yeah, that thought is… not one to be having in the middle of an Arrow-related crisis with a toddler on her lap. Why is her brain slipping into serious no-go zones all of a sudden?

Boundaries, Felicity, she tells herself.

"Oh," Moira breathes out in an unsteady voice from behind her, "I can't handle this."

"Mom, have a seat," Oliver advises, stepping away from where he's been peering over Felicity's shoulder.

"My daughter has been missing for nearly two weeks and I had no idea, Oliver," she replies. Her voice is shaking, her breaths coming in uneven spurts. "I thought I was giving her space. I thought… I thought… oh, *Oliver*, what if-"

"Don't start down that road," Oliver interrupts. Though she knows it's futile, Felicity sorely hopes he takes his own advice on this. "We had no way of knowing…" He pauses before letting out a heavy sigh, the words obviously too much for him. "We don't even know now. Just let

Felicity do her search. We'll find Thea. But in the meantime we can't blame ourselves for not noticing she was missing when we didn't even have a clue she might be gone."

It's a little jarring how rational he sounds since he tends to look at her like she's talking in French when she says the same thing to him. Presuming he doesn't speak French, that is. Now that she's thinking about it, she wouldn't be surprised at all if that was yet another one of his hidden talents.

"Well, we should have," Moira snaps, her voice reverberating through the large space. "We should have known something was wrong…" Her eyes narrow shrewdly as she redirects her attention. "Tell me, Malcolm, if you've known our daughter was missing for nearly *two weeks,* why did you wait until just now to come to us with this?"

"You're distressed," Malcolm replies, in what has to be the most obvious statement of fact that Felicity has ever heard. Moira visibly bristles at the lofty arrogance he wields like a weapon being directed at her so readily. "I understand. I am, too. But, you would do well to remember that I owe you nothing, Moira. You should be grateful I've come to you at all, for our daughter's sake, if nothing else."

These are the exact wrong words to be saying to Moira Queen right now. Felicity types faster, as if sheer willpower and the desire to avoid being privy to any of Malcolm and Moira's drama might make her search go faster.

"Grateful," Moira scoffs. "I should be grateful? If anything has happened to *my* daughter-"

"You'll what?" Malcolm baits. "Send your son to put a few arrows in me?"

"No, Malcolm," Moira counters, like his assumption is patently ridiculous. "I'll end you myself."

It's like the tables have suddenly turned between them, giving Felicity whiplash. She glances back long enough to see Moira and Malcolm toe-to-toe. It strikes her how very little physical stature means in this moment - for all intents and purposes, they are on equal ground.

"You *would*, wouldn't you?" Malcolm asks with entirely more affection than the conversation warrants.

And… dear God, Felicity's pretty sure she just heard Malcolm Merlyn's

turned-on voice. Making a face - *oh*, that is something she never, ever needed to hear - Felicity turns back to the searches. Ellie settles further in her lap, ducking her head, her fingers toying with the hem of her mother's shirt. Without a second thought, Felicity presses her lips to the top of Ellie's head and breathes her in, as if the pure light that is her daughter will eradicate the sounds echoing in her mind. Wow, does she hope that works, because otherwise she's going to need bleach to scrub her ears immediately, please and thank you.

"Most definitely," Moira responds to Malcolm after a long moment of calculated silence. "If this is because of you…"

"Because of me?" Malcolm interrupts. "And how, dear Moira, could this possibly be because of me?"

"I cannot begin to tally the number of people who would do anything to make you suffer for your sins," she points out. "For all the ways you've wronged them." Her voice stays level, quiet, but the intensity in her words makes it seem much louder than it is. "If any of them were to learn the truth behind the circumstances of Thea's birth…"

"You're honestly blaming me?" Malcolm asks, the ferocity in his words finally betraying how very much Moira's getting to him.

Felicity hasn't felt quite this level of awkward listening in to someone else's arguments since she was six and her parents' screaming match was too loud to be drowned out by the Disney soundtrack she'd turned up. 'Be Our Guest,' indeed.

"Blame suits you quite well, Malcolm," Moira bites out. "And you *so* frequently deserve it."

"Mom…" Oliver ventures, his voice soft, like he's approaching wild animals, which isn't that far off. It's not the best idea to put himself in the middle of this, but Felicity knows why he does, especially since the foundry is silent, every bit of attention on Malcolm and Moira. Oliver moves closer to them, and Felicity looks back long enough to see his hands raise placatingly. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but it's a little early to jump to conclusions. We don't know anything yet."

"Thank you, Oliver," Malcolm says, his pleased smirk evident, eyes still on Moira in a triumphant moment that's far from earned.

"That wasn't for you," Oliver instantly snaps, his voice lowering. Ellie curls in against Felicity's breast and her hands naturally move to hold her closer. "If it turns out she's right - if *anything* happened to Thea

because of you - there is absolutely nothing that will stop me from putting an arrow straight through your heart. You will pay for any part you had in whatever has happened to her."

"Your view of justice is incredibly narrow, Oliver," Malcolm replies. "You're a loaded gun, but you can't see past the bullseye to the greater picture."

"I don't need to *hit* anything but the bullseye," Oliver counters, "so that works out fine."

"You've always been like a son to me, Oliver, but…"

Moira's disbelieving scoff cuts Malcolm off and Felicity's turning before she can stop herself - she doesn't miss the quick, somewhat terrified look Oliver shoots his mother before his face shutters. She knows what thought is racing through his mind. Lies and his mother are old bedfellows. If she's kept secrets about her relationship with Malcolm Merlyn in the past, if she's lied about Thea's parentage, what's to say she hasn't done so more than once? It's an entirely unfounded fear. Felicity knows this - Oliver might not have a striking resemblance to Robert Queen but it's there. It's enough. Just like Moira lying once is enough to open the door to doubts that have the power to turn someone's blood to ice.

"Don't be absurd," Moira huffs dismissively.

"Considering how you treated your *actual* son," Oliver cuts in, his words making Malcolm's lips curl back with anger, "I'm going to choose not to see that as a compliment."

"Maybe if he'd been a better son, I'd have been a better father," Merlyn challenges.

Felicity physically recoils at that, her stomach turning sour. She didn't know Tommy, not really. She never got the chance to talk with him, to get to know him, to see him the way Oliver obviously did. But she does know he was good in spite of the cruel man before her. She irrationally wants to hug the very son he's talking about. That's not possible, of course, so she holds her daughter closer instead, a wave of comfort and *gratitude* washing through her that Oliver is the man who's the father of her children.

"That's not how it works," Oliver grits out, his voice ringing with years of anger, years of seeing the damage Malcolm had inflicted on the man he'd considered a brother. "You were his *father*. You should have

protected him. You should have been there for him. And even if you were so completely incapable of that, you should've - at the very least - not detonated the weapon of mass destruction that killed him."

It's absolutely chilling how unfazed Malcolm is. "Two weeks playing house and you think you can lecture me on fatherhood?" he asks. "It's cute, Oliver, to think you have any idea what you're talking about."

"Literally anybody has a better idea how to be a parent than you do," Sara chimes in, speaking up for the first time in ages. She steps closer to both of them, her eyes steady on Malcolm. "You don't get to pass judgement on Oliver. Not about this."

Malcolm obviously realizes it's no longer just him against Oliver and Moira. Sara doesn't budge an inch, her gaze unwavering, and that's only added to when Diggle joins them, his gun still in-hand, waiting.

This is all going to escalate. *Quickly*. The more Malcolm talks, the more on edge everyone is and there are entirely too many weapons in the room for Felicity's liking. At least there are with her toddler there, too. She's not really certain she's actually opposed to Team Arrow disposing of Malcolm in a permanent way, but it can't be something that happens in front of her three-year-old. And, really, it can't happen until Thea has the sense of closure she deserves.

"Aunt Thea!"

The tension instantly shifts.

Felicity's head whips back toward the computer, her eyes immediately finding what Ellie had seen. Sure enough, they've got a hit, but it's not from anywhere she'd have expected.

"What was she doing *there*?" Felicity asks aloud as everyone crowds around her. The algorithm captures Thea's movements perfectly, playing the small clip over and over. Felicity clicks a few buttons and it fills one screen. The larger picture does nothing to erase the confusion about what the *hell* Thea was doing.

"When was this?" Oliver asks, watching his sister stride into Alderman Blood's campaign headquarters. His eyes rove over the entire image, trying to find something that will make sense of it, but there's nothing. "What the hell was she thinking?"

"It was twenty-five minutes after our press conference," Felicity says, checking the timestamp. "She didn't believe us, Oliver, she didn't trust

us. Maybe she went to Blood looking for information."

"When does she come back out?" Malcolm asks.

Despite herself, Felicity's hand freezes for a microsecond. She wants to check. She really does, but she also doesn't want to do any-goddamn-thing at Malcolm Merlyn's command.

"Fast-forward a bit?" Oliver requests. She glances at him and nods. Their eyes meet, a blur of worried fear colliding before she turns back to follow through with his request. She works quickly, simultaneously making sure the other searches are running, just in case, as her eyes dart over the screen, waiting to see Thea again…

It doesn't take long to find what they're looking for, although it's not Thea they see.

Isabel Rochev strides into the building a mere twenty minutes later, nonchalant as ever.

"Well…" Malcolm drawls. "It looks like it's her *other* father's sins that put Thea in this position, and not mine. Or isn't that Robert's little intern mistress?" He smirks. "Quite a career path she's taken."

"Did everyone know about them but me?" Oliver asks a little too sharply.

"Your father wasn't particularly good about being subtle," Malcolm advises. His eyes purposefully linger on Moira's prideful face as her gaze fixes sightlessly on a wall somewhere over Felicity's computers. "He may have kept it away from you and Thea, but his… indiscretions were hardly a secret. He always appreciated a fiery, beautiful, ambitious young woman. Much like yourself, Oliver."

She's not sure if that's his way of rubbing the fact that Oliver and Robert Queen both slept with the same woman, or if it's a really backhanded compliment… either way, Felicity doesn't like it. Nor does she like the fact that Malcolm watches Moira the entire time he speaks. It sends a disgusted shudder down her spine. Because, dear God, knowing the two of them had been together decades ago was one thing, but seeing something approaching a twisted sense of affection on Malcolm Merlyn's face is another thing entirely.

It's somehow worse when Moira doesn't give him an inch of consideration.

"She's a cockroach that needs to be ground beneath my heel," Moira says. She finally turns, meeting Malcolm's gaze. "And you're going to help me crush her."

"Am I now?" Malcolm asks.

"You are," Moira asserts. "Because it helps your daughter. And… because it means I owe you a favor. And because it's one more way you can screw over Robert, even though he's not around to see it. So, yes, Malcolm. You will help me. And you know it, or you wouldn't even be here."

He doesn't reply right away, but his answering smile says more than enough.

"You have always been one to see the bigger picture, Moira," he replies finally.

Ellie huffs on Felicity's lap, a little puff of frustrated air dancing across her collarbone as the child pouts.

"He's a *bad* man," she grumbles beneath her breath, fingers curling around the collar of Felicity's blouse as she glares.

"You are not wrong," Felicity replies quietly, eyes still scanning the video feed. Everyone's crowded in around them though, so there's no way anyone missed the exchange. Still, their hushed voices allow the others the luxury of pretending they haven't heard the conversation.

"When does Thea come back out?" Oliver asks, pulling their attention back to the matter at hand, where it belongs.

"She doesn't," Felicity replies, glancing at the timestamp that's moved ahead by a solid twelve hours. "But neither do Isabel or Blood." A few keystrokes later and she's pulling up the city plans along with the original blueprints of the building. She taps the screen. "There is a network of abandoned subway tracks *just* beneath his headquarters, though. Convenient, right?"

"You think they have some kind of secret escape route?" Diggle asks.

"Or evil headquarters," Felicity says. "They definitely didn't leave through the front door."

"Are all the subway tunnels intact?" Oliver asks.

She shrugs. "I don't know, I can't tell from these. I can…" Her fingers fly over the keyboard, diving into the history of the subway that hadn't lasted very long in Starling City, mostly due to structural questions and poor track construction. "Most of them were sealed off. Which means they probably locked a few doors here and there, so they are probably intact. As much as they can be, considering."

"So, in theory…" Oliver says slowly, his voice growing darker as the full implications hit him. "They have access to nearly the entire city?"

"In theory," Felicity confirms. "If that's what happened, which… it kinda looks that way. The street cameras on the back alley aren't showing any activity except for people throwing trash away. Unfortunately that trash doesn't include Isabel." She's now a solid twenty-six hours into the camera feed outside Blood's campaign office and it's like all three of them had vanished. There are plenty of people coming and going, but the three - really, the one - they want to see don't show up again. Until… "Oh!"

Oliver's hand lands on her shoulder at her outburst, but she barely notices it until she feels him squeezing. She nods, not taking her eyes off the screen as she finds what she'd just seen.

Isabel and Blood. Felicity instantly stops the feed, slowing it down to normal speeds, showing the two of them walking side-by-side *into* the building. A building that - in theory, and wow, the theories are really starting to rack up - Blood had already been in, the building that they'd all seen Isabel enter two days before. They hadn't seen them leave.

And still no Thea.

Felicity's stomach plummets. They've had her for nearly two weeks, if the timestamp is anything to go by. For two weeks, she and Oliver have been living their lives in a protected little bubble, on the defense for once rather than taking offensive measures, and all that time, Thea had been with *them*.

Is she still alive? That thought turns Felicity's mouth ashy, but it's easy to push down, because really, what would they gain from killing her? Slade had used her as a pawn once before, although his intent with that had been clear. They know *nothing* about what Isabel's planning. And it makes the fact that Thea is missing and very likely in her grasp all the more terrifying.

Oliver squeezes the *hell* out of her shoulder, a slight tremor in his grip.

Felicity looks up at him, but his eyes are glued on the frozen image of Isabel and Blood, walking so cavalierly, as if nothing's wrong. As if his little sister hadn't just walked in there and never come out again.

"Is there anything else?" he asks softly. "Later, or…?"

She's already fast-forwarding, the face recognition software speeding along with her. A couple of long tense minutes pass where they wait for a hit, but nothing comes. Thea never leaves the building again, up until… now.

When the silence becomes too much, Ellie asks, "Did you find Aunt Thea, Momma? Is she coming over?"

Oliver's grip on her shoulder falters, and Felicity covers his hand. He barely reacts as she answers, "I don't think so, sweetie."

"They have her," he says, his voice rough and low, like he's trying to keep it from Ellie.

Felicity can only nod.

Diggle's the first to respond. "What's the plan?"

"You go get her."

Oliver's head snaps up to look at his mother, finding her already staring back at him. For a long second, it's as if nobody else is in the room save for them. There's a lot they don't agree on but there is one thing that is unquestionable: Thea is their immediate priority.

"I don't care if you have to burn the building down, Oliver. Bring my daughter home."

Like there's even a question.

Malcolm's hand finds Moira's shoulder - the mirror image thing going on with the hands on the shoulders thing makes Felicity shudder - as he says, "*We* are going to get Thea." Moira opens her mouth to argue, her face paling even more if that were possible, but Malcolm cuts her off. "I think we all know how capable Oliver is when it comes to defeating his opponents. I'm not leaving the fate of my daughter in his hands, Moira."

"Now is not the time-"

"He's not staying here," Oliver says sharply, cutting his mother off.

Felicity starts, looking up at him. His brow is heavy, a darkness she hasn't seen in a while shadowing his face. "He's coming with me."

"Oliver…" Moira starts.

"No." Oliver slashes his hand through the air. "I'm not leaving him here with Felicity and Ellie. Or you. It's not happening."

But the thought of him being alone with Malcolm Merlyn? And what, what are they going to do, go storm Blood's campaign office, or Queen Consolidated?

There's no plan. Nobody's talking about a *plan*.

Oliver breaks away from the group and Felicity spins in her chair as the others pull away. Ellie's sensed the change in the room, the spike in the tension, and she's quiet, still wrapped around her mother. She's not letting go anytime soon, not with Malcolm around, but her gaze is trained on Oliver now, like she's honed into his emotions and knows that something is very wrong. Oliver instinctively makes his way to his bow, his fingers already rasping together like he's itching to hold it.

"It's nice to see you've gained at least a little wisdom since our last meeting, Oliver," Malcolm says.

That has Oliver spinning back to face him, and Felicity almost leaps from her chair to put her hand on his arm but he stops himself a mere inch from Malcolm's face. The only indication that the older man has any reaction is his eyes twitching, his lips tightening into a thin line for a split second before giving Oliver a genial smile.

It takes Felicity a second to realize that Moira's paused where she was about to grab Malcolm and Sara and Diggle are at Oliver's back. But his anger is carefully controlled, which Felicity knows makes it a thousand times more dangerous.

"I don't need your praise," Oliver says quietly. Felicity shivers at the darkness coating his words and she hugs Ellie closer, covering her ear, pressing her other against her chest. "The only reason you're involved in this at all is because you're Thea's father, and I won't rob her of that." He pauses, his eyes drilling into Malcolm's, driving his point home. "But the minute you're a threat to my family… that ends. I will kill you, even if it means Thea never forgives me. Are we clear?"

Malcolm's only response is to lift an eyebrow before bowing his head

mockingly. His eyes never leave Oliver's.

Oh yeah, this is a *great* idea.

"What's the play, Oliver?" Diggle asks.

"I'm going to go talk to Isabel," Oliver replies simply. He dismisses Malcolm without a second glance, turning to Felicity and taking a slow, measured breath before asking, "Is she still at Queen Consolidated?"

That controlled anger is still at the surface, and Felicity's pretty sure if Ellie wasn't here, it'd be slipping out a bit more.

"I can check," she says. "Although heading to QC might not be the best idea. It's probably still crawling with police after the attack. I have no doubt she'll take complete advantage of that by holding another one of her 'I'm a b-word, ask me how' press conferences."

"A neutral location might be best for something like this," Lyla suggests. Diggle nods his agreement as Oliver bows his head. "Assuming, of course, you aren't going wearing that."

'That' being his Arrow suit, or what's left of it. He's still wearing his leather pants and his boots, the black t-shirt straining around his biceps. The strict lines of his body, the tense way he's holding himself, it's a garish contrast to the herd of Ellie-drawn band-aids along his forearm. It's almost like they don't belong in the same world at that moment, because right now he's not really Oliver Queen - he's the Arrow.

Felicity doesn't like it. She should be used to it, she's seen it the entire time she's worked with him. But right now, knowing what else he's capable of - the softness, the joy, the relative sense of peace… It's a heady reminder that it's only been a few weeks since their entire worlds were turned upside down.

"I'm going as Oliver Queen," Oliver replies definitively. Felicity's lips quirk at the third-person-regression. "She already knows I'm the Arrow." He looks at Felicity again, and for a second, she sees the tiniest bit of softening behind his eyes. She takes a deep breath at the sight. "Find Isabel?"

"Sooner rather than later would be better, Miss Smoak," Malcolm adds when she pauses a literal fraction of a second to offer Oliver a soft look of support.

She can practically feel the air thicken from the annoyance coming off Oliver. But before he can say anything, she replies, "That's kinda funny coming from the guy who claims all the resources in the land, but can't keep track of a nineteen year old." She doesn't give Malcolm a chance to reply before she's nodding to Oliver with a quick, "I'm on it," and then she's spinning to her computers.

It's practically muscle memory at this point, even with a handful of toddler in her lap - she pings Isabel's cell phone, and as that triangulates, she pulls the recent police and news reports up before going to the current footage off the security cameras at QC. Her cell phone location lights up and Felicity pulls up the cameras to the floor housing the executive suites, the one where Robert Queen's old office was - now, Isabel's. The camera only catches the elevator lobby, but it's enough to see that Isabel is there.

"Got her," Felicity says. She glances back at Malcolm. "And hey, took me a whole minute and a half."

Sara snickers and Diggle's face tightens minutely with amused disapproval. Moira just closes her eyes in quiet exasperation.

"Felicity," Oliver sighs. He opens his mouth to continue but the words seem to escape him. And then his shoulders fall in a quiet huff of a laugh and when he looks at her again, it's the Oliver she's seen for the last two weeks. It's quick, just a flash - they really, really do not have time for this, she reminds herself - but it's there. "Where is she?"

"She's at Queen Consolidated," Felicity says. "Forty-eighth floor."

Oliver nods and then his hand brushes over her shoulder in a practiced move. It's full of familiar ease, something he's done dozens of times before… except they aren't what they had been, not anymore. His hand lingers now, his fingers grazing the back of her neck, his lips twitching in a grateful smile. His eyes switch to Ellie for a second, and it's like the sight of his daughter hardens his resolve.

He just got so much - a *family*. She can see in his eyes his refusal to lose anyone else.

"Go get her, Oliver," Felicity says softly, just for his ears.

With a short nod, Oliver squeezes the back of her neck in response before looking at Diggle. "I need to change," he says, his eyes switching to Malcolm. The request is clear: watch him. Digg nods his understanding. As Oliver walks away, Felicity shifts Ellie in her arms

and stands. Diggle moves towards her, his eyes on Ellie. A delighted grin lights up his face as he says, "Hey there," to which Ellie perks up with a perky, "Hi!" It doesn't escape Felicity's notice that Malcolm moves back, but his shrewd gaze misses nothing.

"Take her for a sec?" Felicity asks and Digg nods, opening his arms to her. Ellie's quick to tighten her grip though and Felicity instantly says, "I'll be right here, Ellie, okay? I'm not going anywhere."

Ellie shakes her head. "No, Momma, the bad man's still here."

"I won't let anything happen to either of you, munchkin, okay?" Diggle says. Ellie purses her lips, but she's far more relaxed than before and after a second, she nods. "Now hop on over here."

Felicity hands her off, letting her hand linger on her daughter's back until she's settled in Diggle's arms. "I'm gonna go talk to Aunt Sara, okay?" she says, and as Ellie nods, Felicity notices Sara caught her name. She closes the distance between them.

"Everything okay?" Sara asks.

She narrowly avoids a ridiculous babble about how clearly not everything is okay, because there's really no time to beat around the bush at the moment. "Will you go with them?"

Sara's brows draw together, her eyes darting to Malcolm.

"I don't trust him," Felicity continues. "I mean, I trust him about as far as I can throw him, and I literally cannot throw him." That has amusement filling Sara's face, and Felicity flushes because she knows she's somehow wound up tumbling straight into a babble zone all over again. "I just don't want him going with Oliver - not that I want him here, I'm pretty sure we can all agree that having him anywhere isn't great - but I don't trust him. So, can you…?"

"Of course," Sara says with a soft smile. She reaches out to squeeze Felicity's arm before winking at her. "I'll keep them from killing each other."

Felicity smiles. "Thank you."

With a warm smile, she moves to grab her jacket just as Oliver comes out from the back. He's changed into a suit, something far more business-y than she was expecting. She actually kinda missed this look on him, if she's being honest. They haven't had a lot of 'suit'

opportunities the last few weeks and he wears it so very well.

"Let's get this over with," Oliver says. His voice is quiet, but the air around him is every bit as commanding and serious as it is when he's suited up with a bow in hand.

"I'm tagging along," Sara announces, sauntering past Malcolm to face Oliver.

Oliver pauses with a frown. "Your head okay after that fight?"

Sara shoots him a smile. "The back of my skull had a disagreement with a minivan. The minivan lost." She shoots Malcolm a sidelong glance. "And you need someone to have your back. I'm there."

"Very touching," Malcolm says, as if the words were an invitation to insert himself into the middle of the conversation - because he's apparently incapable of not being the focus of any situation. "Now, if we could stop with the coddling, I'd like to save my daughter's life."

Oliver grimaces at the reminder of what's at stake. He gives a short nod to Sara before giving Malcolm a hard look. "Lead the way," he says.

It's a matter of debate whether Malcolm is gutsy or stupid to turn his back to the entirety of the team - most of whom would much prefer him dead - but he does it anyhow, taking eerily silent steps up toward the main level.

As Sara follows next, Oliver glances at Felicity, and then Ellie. Felicity can only imagine the things going through his head - everything from not wanting to leave them *again* to probably wondering what he'd do if something like this ever happened to their daughter. But he doesn't come over, like maybe he needs the separation to get through what they're heading into.

Ellie lifts her hand and waves with a soft, "Bye, Daddy."

He barely smiles in return, but it's there, and then his eyes find Felicity's one last time before he turns to follow Malcolm and Sara.

But she can't leave it at that.

"Oliver," Felicity calls.

His name's out before she can think about it and in the next second

she's hurrying across the room as he turns to back to her. His face softens, his shoulders collapsing a little - it's recognition, more than anything, of how much he's come to depend on her, and she on him. It's no longer him against the world, it's *them*, and the urge to reaffirm that is undeniable.

Felicity's hands instantly find the back of his neck and he shuts his eyes as she tugs him down, just enough to kiss his forehead. It's soft, cherishing… *reassuring*. Some of the tension melts from his brow at the gentle touch and he sighs, a deep breath that feels like relief at the press of her lips to his skin. He leans into her, his hands finding her waist, his fingers digging.

Telling him to be safe would be ridiculous. Nothing they do is safe and that's not about to change. He will always fight to come home to her. To *them*. She knows that now. But she also knows that look she saw on his face, and she could see it in the distance he kept between him and his family - he still needs to hear it from her, words he won't ask for, something to push them forward.

"I believe in you," she whispers against his temple. "You can do this. Bring your sister home."

"Yeah," he agrees, almost on instinct, pressing the side of his head against her face in a momentary nuzzle. She presses back, breathing him in, holding him a little tighter for a second. It's a second too short, as always, but it's precious seconds they can't spare.

"And Oliver?" She pulls back - because as much as she dislikes Malcolm Merlyn, he'd been right about the urgency of the situation. Felicity meets his gaze, holding it. "Don't turn your back on Malcolm. Not even once."

That sinks in. His eyes darken a shade, turning harder, like he's putting on some kind of invisible armor, like he's readying for battle. And she knows what he's going to say before he says it.

"Not a chance."

Chapter 25

The car pulls away from the club, smoothly merging into the midday traffic. Oliver's eyes don't leave the building until it disappears. He catches the light tapping of Felicity on her keyboard over the comms, and the even fainter sound of Ellie talking in the background.

In some ways, it feels like Oliver Queen stays behind in the lair. The parts of him that matter - the bits that are really *him* - are kept safe in Felicity and Ellie's care. There's no place for this new identity he's forged for himself right now. Arrow suit or business suit, he can't be a family man, a father or a lover at the moment. There's too much at stake to risk showing Isabel any sort of vulnerability.

So Oliver drags his eyes away from the window. He shoves those feelings down, lets the gravity of the situation sink in and feels a mask slide across his face as surely as if he'd obscured his identity with a hood and a strip of cloth across his eyes.

"We got a plan?" Sara asks.

Oliver's grateful that she doesn't ask if he's okay. He's not. She knows that.

Though her words are directed at him, her eyes are on Malcolm. Oliver knows that even if her gaze had been settled on him, all of her senses would be tracking Malcolm's every single move. It's both precaution and recognition of that danger that the man embodies. Sara's always had a fantastic sense of self-preservation, one that usually ends up extending to the people around her. The ones she cares about, at least.

"Confront Isabel," Oliver answers, a grim line to his lips and no amusement in his eyes at all. "Get my sister back. Implicate Blood and win my mom the election."

Sara's sharp eyes switch to him. "That's not a plan, Ollie, that's a kamikaze run." There's a noise of agreement in his ear and he knows Felicity's heard the entire exchange through the comms.

"We have the element of surprise," he counters. "Isabel doesn't know that we know anything and she's undoubtedly busy with the attack at QC and the election just two days away."

"Surprise only gets us so far, Oliver," Malcolm advises.

Oliver squares his jaw, curling one hand into a tight fist at the sound of the other man's voice. It was just a few minutes ago that he'd made thinly-veiled threats against him and those he loves, all on top of finding out that he's the 'Bad Man' his daughter told them about when she first arrived. The bad man who was going to get into Felicity's room and do… God only knew what. It's probably a really good idea that Sara came along, because if it'd just been them he might've rammed his knuckles down Malcolm's throat at his arrogant tone.

Malcolm's not done. "She had to have known that we'd figure out she has Thea eventually and that the attack on QC was her doing."

"Then what do you suggest, Malcolm?" Oliver snaps. "What leverage do we possibly have over Isabel other than two former League of Assassins members and the Arrow threatening her? I'm going to need you to tell me, because I've got *nothing*. I've got nothing and she's got my sister!"

"*Oliver*…" Felicity's gentle voice sounds in his ear and he closes his eyes, turning toward the window. She soothes him. She always has… but that doesn't mean she has a fix for this. She doesn't. And they both know it.

"I'm sorry," he says after a beat, half to Felicity and half to Sara, but Malcolm nods like it's meant for him, something Oliver ignores. "This is just…"

"Ollie, I get it," Sara says. "Nobody's gonna blame you for having a rough time with this."

"It's just… it's *Thea*," he stresses, as if that says everything. And to him it does.

Sara nods, a shadow crossing her face. "I know."

Oliver closes his eyes.

"They took her for a reason, Oliver," Malcolm points out. "Isabel isn't the criminal mastermind she thinks she is and she loves the sound of her own voice. We need to get her talking, find out why they took Thea and what they want from us to get her back."

Oliver's eyes fly to Malcolm, his brow knitting as he weighs his words. Isabel might not be a criminal mastermind, but Malcolm Merlyn

surely is. Oliver's starting to wonder if maybe the psychotic mass murderer had a point about his usefulness - if anyone can think from Isabel's perspective, it's Malcolm.

"You think they want something in trade?" Oliver surmises. "If that's true, why didn't they contact us?"

The thin smile that paints itself across Malcolm's lips is quietly patronizing, like he's trying to explain something to a very small child and doesn't really have the patience for it. Oliver's look melts into a glare, his annoyance with the man spiking.

"Have you ever been hunting or fishing, Oliver?" Malcolm asks. Oliver has to bite his tongue to keep from doing something he knows he'll regret as Malcolm chuckles at his own words. "What am I asking, of course you have. You wouldn't have survived that island if you hadn't, to say nothing of your elimination of so many of my colleagues." He settles in his seat, shooting Oliver a cavalier look. "So tell me, Oliver, what's the most effective way to hunt?"

Make your prey come to you. Lure them in. Keep yourself in a position of power.

The answer is instinctual, still so deeply embedded in his bones that he doesn't even have to think about it. Of *course* it's about forcing them to come to her, about putting herself in a position of power. When has anything that Isabel has ever done been about anything else?

Oliver's short nod is the only acknowledgment he's willing to give. "We need to figure out what she wants then - other than Mom dropping out of the race - and we need to do it right now. She's put us in a bind and I want to turn it back around on her as soon as possible."

"Oliver," Felicity cuts in over the comm. "Your mom wants to say something to you."

There's a rustle as it's passed over to his mother and as soon as the white noise stops, he asks, "Mom?"

"I've called Walter," she says in place of a greeting.

"You…" His eyes find Sara, who merely raises an eyebrow in question. Oliver is particularly glad that Malcolm doesn't have an earpiece because the curiosity on his face is probably not a good thing. "Okay, why?"

"For years, he raised Thea," Moira replies, which explains absolutely nothing. "And despite my somewhat rocky relationship with him, he adores your sister as if she were his own. He would do anything he can to help us get her back. I didn't tell him much, obviously, but enough to recognize that the situation is serious."

"Mom, I've been gone for less than fifteen minutes," Oliver says. "What did you do?"

"We have assets, Oliver," Moira points out, "which Thea helped us secure. And Isabel's control over QC is predicated by her stock options and her chokehold on the board." She makes a small ticking noise. "The latter is mostly dictated by the former."

"Even with Thea signing the paperwork, we don't have the liquid assets for a large buyout," Oliver counters.

"Perhaps not," Moira says. "But we do have a tremendous number of assets to borrow against. And, with his connections at the bank and the precarious position Thea is in, Walter was more than happy to agree to push through the paperwork for a mortgage on several of our properties. Now, it does put us in a relatively tight spot with our immediate financial situation. The turnaround won't be anything extraordinary, which I was hoping to avoid, but…"

"Are you telling me we're majority owners in Queen Consolidated again?" Oliver asks, barely taking note of the way both Malcolm and Sara sit up a little straighter at his words.

"I might not have been able to secure much in the way of support as an inmate, but as the leading mayoral candidate, I have a great deal more doors open to me," Moira replies. Considering the day they've already had and the fact that they'd gotten into a fight about how to handle the Isabel situation, it's nice to hear the satisfied smile he catches in her voice. "My attorneys are signing the paperwork now. We'll have 57% of QC's stock by the time you get to the building."

"That's…" Oliver shakes his head, more than a little floored. "Mom, that's incredible."

"I'm under no illusions," she says, pragmatic as always. "This is war on several fronts and we need to win all of the battles we can. Obviously, I can't position myself as both the city's business and political leadership. I would never win the election. And we do need me to win, if for no other reason than to throw a wrench in Isabel and Sebastian's plans. So, the shares belong to the family trust, which I

will be signing control of over to you."

That completely blindsides him. He wants to argue that he's the last person who needs to be in control of the shares, the absolute last, but at the same time, he sees the usefulness of her actions. It's smart - it puts the control back in their hands while not jeopardizing her platform. There's only one immediate thought that comes to mind.

His voice is heavy as he notes, "We can't do that without Thea's signature."

"Perhaps not," Moira says. A light melancholy fills the pause, and he knows both of them are feeling his sister's absence. He knows that it's not just because they need her signature, but some part of him recoils at the realization that lately it feels like it keeps coming back to legal formalities. Moira sighs, breaking the silence, her fortitude back. "But I can sign my rights over to you, with or without her approval. Or yours."

"Mom…" Oliver licks his lips, just like he does when he's nervous and needing a moment to think - something Felicity had pointed out to him when they'd been watching Ellie climb a tree on her quest for a new space to build a castle for her fairies. He lowers his voice to where he hopes Malcolm can't hear him. "You'll be left with nothing. If you do this-"

"It's already done," she cuts him off. "And, Oliver, I'm hardly a pauper. I don't suspect that you're about to turn me out and I'll have the mayor's office, if all goes well."

"It's still risking a lot."

"It would be risking more not to do this," she counters. "If signing everything over to you is the cost of saving Thea's life, that is a cost I will most gladly pay." He closes his eyes, recognizing the gravity of what she's done. Moira Queen has never defined herself by the number of zeros in her bank account, not when it comes to her family. But that doesn't mean she hasn't used her means as a shield and as a weapon, in any way she possibly could to gain the upper ground. What she's doing is a lot, and he knows it, just as much as he knows if she'd told him what she was planning, he would have opted to look at different options. Moira continues, cutting off his train of thought, "Now you have the company, Oliver. You have something Isabel desperately wants. Use that edge."

He nods. "I will."

"Good. While you're doing that I'm going to make a few calls to the board and then my publicist. She left me a message about making a public statement regarding the attack at QC."

"I know what this took, and I appreciate that, but I can't have you doing things like this without at least talking to me about it." He catches her disgruntled huff on the other end and before she can say anything, he finishes with, "Even if it's just so that we all know what's happening, before we actually take steps like this." He pauses, shaking his head in wonder because *this* was the leverage they'd just been talking about needing. "But if this works…"

"It will work," his mother interrupts with a confident air. "Just don't sign any more napkins, and we'll be fine."

Oliver flinches and bites his tongue to keep from replying. It's a reminder he didn't need. He wants to point out it was a piece of paper, not a napkin, feeling the absurd need to defend some part of his actions. It's her not-so-subtle way of taking his last comment and turning it around on him, using the truth, which always makes the cruelest cut.

He's apparently quiet too long because his mother suddenly feels the need to fill the silence.

"Oliver…"

"I've got it," he replies, his voice a little sharper than he means it to be. He lets out a frustrated sigh, squeezing his eyes shut. That's not fair. It's not her he's mad at, not about this. He's aggravated at the way she's using it, but she's not wrong either. Losing QC had been his fault. He'd trusted the wrong person, and if he hadn't been rash and impulsive, he would have known that. "I'm sorry." His voice softens. "I get it. I'll be careful."

"Good," she replies, her voice a little bit gentler. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that we can't afford mistakes."

She doesn't, he already knows that very, *very* well. But he gets why she says it. It's probably better said aloud anyhow.

Oliver nods, even though she can't see him.

"Felicity needs the earpiece back now," Moira says. But she doesn't let go just yet, her voice hardening as she adds, "I do so hope you get a chance to see the look on Ms. Rochev's face when she realizes we've

regained control of the company. Enjoy it on my behalf, if you do. I know I'm relishing the mental picture."

Oliver breathes out a soft laugh. His mother… she is equal parts connivingly vindictive and maternally protective. As much as that tends to cause more problems than not for him - so many times it's caused problems for him - it's also just so thoroughly *her* that he finds himself relishing it. She is his mother, and he loves her, faults and all.

"Hey," Felicity says, her voice significantly brighter than a moment ago. "Congratulations on your gazillion dollars."

He lets out a bark of laughter - only she can get that out of him, especially under circumstances like this. Some of the pressure in his chest loosens a bit, recognizing the new edge this gives them over Isabel. It's almost like it wasn't entirely real until Felicity had said something about it. Hearing it from his mother was one thing, but from Felicity… God, he loves her.

The smile is evident in his voice when he replies with, "I don't think it's a gazillion."

"Billions, then," Felicity counters. "It's more dollars than a lot of countries' net worths. Like *all* the dollars."

"I really don't care about that," Oliver tells her. "I just want Thea back and the company out of Isabel's hands."

"I know," Felicity agrees quietly, and it's his turn to hear her smile. "And for the record, I don't care about the money either."

His heart skips a beat. He already knew that, there'd never been a question of it, but it's still amazing to hear it. It's even more amazing to *believe* it. Money drives so many people to do so many things. It's made everyone's interactions with his family suspect for his entire life. But not her. Not Felicity.

"I know," he replies, his voice taking on the intimate softness he can't seem to avoid when it comes to her. Not that he wants to. "I never doubted that."

"Well good," she says. He can hear the gentle impact of her fingers on her keyboard in the background. "As long as I have my fella and our daughter, I'm set." He chuckles and her fingers stop for a split second as she adds, "I love you."

"Me too," he replies.

The cabin of the car is too cramped with company he definitely does not want to be in, and saying those words feels like he's letting people into a place of happiness that he doesn't want to share with them.

Felicity seems to understand because she's suddenly switching topics. "So… know how we said QC was probably a terrible place to meet Isabel? Home turf and all?"

"Yeah," he responds, suddenly wary. He wonders if it's just his mother and his girlfriend who will change their plans on the fly or if it's going to wind up being all of the women in his life. He wouldn't put it past Ellie. She's clever and headstrong and he adores her for those qualities, but she's already well on her way to giving him gray hairs early.

"Well, she just got a text from Blood to meet him at the Four Seasons where he's scheduled to have a rally tonight."

"I'm guessing Sebastian wasn't actually the one to send the text?" Oliver ventures.

"That would be correct," Felicity supplies, sounding exceedingly proud of herself. "I'm trying to back-date her cell phone pings to try and find her evil lair of doom. Or lairs. I'm not sure yet. But *wow*, does she get around. And that came out wrong. I didn't mean 'get around' like she's slutty. Because, I mean… well, *maybe* but no judgement there. Or here. She can sleep with whoever she wants, that's her business. Except of course that one time where it was totally my business, too, but I meant-"

"I get what you meant," he interrupts, hoping with a quiet desperation that she actually stops because this is not a road he wants to go down at all. Or ever. Especially after what he'd just learned. He groans internally, shoving it down to a place he hopes he never has to visit again. "Keep looking. We need to go at this from every angle we've got."

He shifts as he speaks and lowers the partition in the limo.

Frank had shown up with the car by the time they'd even gotten out of the club and he hadn't so much as batted an eye at Malcolm's presence. But, then again, if people weren't exceedingly discreet and willfully blind to a degree, they didn't tend to last that long in Moira Queen's employ.

"Yes, sir?" Frank asks, meeting Oliver's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Change in plans, Frank," Oliver tells him. "We need to head uptown to the Four Seasons."

"Right away, sir," he confirms crisply.

If Frank's missing some of his recent good-natured snark, Oliver can't blame him. They might be able to rely upon him for absolute discretion, but he's still well aware of who he's driving around town and the way his eyes linger on Malcolm's for a moment before he looks back to the road only emphasizes that fact.

"Your mother has been manipulating things behind the scenes, I presume?" Malcolm asks.

The disaffected air surrounding him is as transparent as Malcolm Merlyn is capable of, and it leaves a sour taste in Oliver's mouth. He hasn't seen the two of them together since before he became aware of their one-time affair and he finds that the vibe between them bothers him. A lot.

But despite that, Oliver can't ignore him. This is information they all need to know.

"She pulled the company out from under Isabel, bought out the majority shares," Oliver replies, leaving out the *how*. Malcolm doesn't look surprised nor intrigued, and Oliver realizes he probably knows way more about their situation than he'd ever let on. "Then she signed it over to me. Technically, it's in the trust, but now I have two-thirds control of that. Thea has the rest."

"That's both helpful and a problem," Sara says. "It's going to put Isabel on the defensive, probably make her even more desperate."

"She was too secure," Oliver says. "She held most of the cards and she knew it." He glances out the window to catch sight of the hotel they're headed toward at the end of the block. "We needed an edge and this gives it to us."

A grave certainty shades her eyes. "Wounded animals are more dangerous, Ollie."

"Maybe," Oliver says, meeting her gaze. "But they're also more vulnerable." Sara purses her lips but before she can continue, he turns his attention to more immediate concerns. "Felicity, we're almost

there. Can you put the security cameras on a loop?"

Her little laugh from the other side of the comms almost sounds offended, but it needed to be asked. They haven't talked any of this through, not in any sort of important detail, such as making sure nobody knows they're there. There's no faster way to lose his mother the election than to have shots of him walking around with Malcolm Merlyn two days before the vote.

"Oh ye of little faith," she says. He can practically see her shaking her head and it makes his lips twitch with a smile. "It was done before you pulled out of Verdant's parking lot and they're none-the-wiser. You should still use the underground parking and enter the building separately. I can't hack people's memories. As cool as that idea might be."

He can't suppress his chuckle at that. Oliver shakes his head fondly before refocusing on the task at hand.

"Frank?" Oliver calls out. "Garage parking if you would, please." Frank nods crisply in return.

"Isabel here yet?" Sara asks. She hadn't grabbed a comm before leaving the lair, which isn't exactly a bad thing in this situation, but it does speak to how much they are making up this plan as they go. That should probably be concerning, but Oliver's done a lot more with a lot less in the past and he's unwilling to consider any possibility of failure. Not in this. Not with Thea's life on the line.

"Three minutes behind you guys," Felicity advises, having picked up Sara's voice through Oliver's comm. "I'd hustle if I were you. She's going to meet 'Sebastian' in the ballroom. Probably best if you get there first so she doesn't call him and, you know, ruin the entire thing."

"Not yet," Oliver relays to the others, "but she's not far. Let's move."

The limo rolls to a stop in an ill-lit section of the hotel parking garage without asking. Oliver wants to say something, but he knows it's not necessary - Frank's a sharp man and well aware of why his employer asked him to park here. There's no one about and the three of them slip out of the limo. Malcolm more-or-less disappears into the shadows immediately, but when Oliver glances at Sara, it's obvious she knows exactly where the other man is. He's suddenly obscenely grateful she came along.

Oliver leans down to address Frank through the open driver's window. "Keep the car running, please," he requests. "I don't think we'll be here long." He moves to go before pausing. "I appreciate your discretion. I'm only here because my sister's in trouble."

"You don't owe me an explanation, sir," Frank replies with a small smile. It reminds him of his first few weeks with Diggle. "But I do appreciate it. The devil seems less evil when we have to barter with him for our family's sake. But you and I both know your family extends well beyond your sister, sir. Pardon me for saying, but the more you can do to limit your involvement with that man, the safer they are."

Oliver sighs, feeling the truth of his words keenly. But he has to save his sister, there's no other options. He *has* to. He'll worry about the other threats and the potential ones he's currently inviting when this one is less immediate.

"Ollie," Sara calls from a few steps away. She gives him a pointed look that more or less says, '*Move your ass.*'

"I appreciate your candor, Frank," Oliver tells him. "And I don't disagree. We'll be back shortly."

"Of course, sir," Frank agrees as Oliver steps away and the window rolls up.

"Where is she headed?" Sara asks.

"Ballroom."

They don't waste any time. Oliver and Sara make their way to the elevator, walking in-tandem, responding as one to their surrounding, like they always have. As they wait for the elevator cab to reach them, Oliver glances behind him.

"He's already upstairs," Sara says in response to his unspoken question.

"That's creepy," Felicity says in his ear.

Oliver wonders if she's watching them in the video cameras, or if her hearing is just that good over the comms. Either way, he nods with a soft, "Yeah."

Sara glances at him. "What'd she say?"

That makes Oliver smile too, that she knows his response hadn't been directed at her. And that she's so okay with it. He loves the way they've all fallen into a sort of rhythm over the last two weeks. It was there, before Ellie showed up in their lives; it was the very thing that kept them alive on certain occasions. But it was never like this. It's a new sense of family, of belonging, of everyone having a place. It settles him; he needs that, considering what they're about to walk into.

"She said Malcolm's creepy," he supplies.

"Because he is," Felicity adds.

Sara smirks as the elevator dings. "She's not wrong."

They make their way up to the mezzanine level. It's been awhile since Oliver's been in this particular hotel - despite it being the Four Seasons, their suites aren't all they're cracked up to be. At least by his pre-island standards. That feeling might have more to do with getting kicked out one summer after seeing how many people they could fit into the swimming pool. He doesn't remember much about the ballroom, he's been in it once or twice for some event or other. He knows it's huge, but it's secluded, in the far corner of the third floor. Oliver wracks his brain, trying to remember the floor plan.

As if she can read his mind, Felicity says, "There's the main entrance to the room and a few others on the opposite side. Not easy to get to from inside the room without having to cross a whole bunch of space. There is a balcony… although it looks like the doors are sealed for construction right now."

Oliver nods, turning to Sara but she waves him off, somehow knowing exactly what they're both thinking.

"I remember the layout from Mallory's birthday party," she says. Oliver furrows his brow - who? Sara gives him a look. "Remember trying to turn the floor into an ice rink using cooking oil?"

The memory surfaces and Oliver makes a face. Oh yeah, he remembers, and he'd be glad to never think about it again. The desire has absolutely nothing to do with embarrassment or shame, but rather because the idea of Ellie knowing about it or, God forbid, getting *ideas* from him, makes him grimace. He feels a wild urge to scrub every stupid thing he's done from everyone's memory, as illogical as that is.

"What now?" Felicity asks.

"Nothing," Oliver answers, but Sara's quick to talk over him, adding in a loud voice, "Ollie and Tommy thought it'd be fun to turn the ballroom into a skating rink using cooking oil." He closes his eyes at the amusement in her voice. "The only reason they didn't get caught is because they got bored after opening the fourth bottle and everyone bailed. Leaving a huge mess."

"Oliver, I love you more than I can express sometimes," Felicity starts. Her words instantly warm his chest. "But I'm almost kind of glad I didn't know you back then."

"Yeah," he replies. "Me too."

"Although I wasn't that far removed from stupid shenanigans myself," she continues under her breath.

That piques his interest and he finds himself glomming onto it, almost desperately. He knows what he's doing, recognizes the weird urge to not focus on the gravity of what's about to go down. It's something he wouldn't have entertained in the least a few weeks ago. Is it because of how much things have changed between him and Felicity? Because of Ellie, maybe? Because he's let himself start to lean on them, depend on them to light up the darkness that still lives deep inside him? It's everything he ran away from before, and it's almost comical how much his attitude has changed about it.

He honestly has no idea what he'd do without them by his side.

"Not that I'd ever admit that," Felicity finishes.

Oliver wants to ask, but now is so not the time for that, even though the distraction is more than welcome. For a split second, it helps keep him from thinking about every worst case scenario, on top of what Thea could have possibly been going through the last two weeks, as well as wrestling with the guilt and fear of knowing that it was likely because he'd been so distracted that he never stopped to wonder *why* they hadn't heard from Thea… Oh yes, the distraction is very welcome, but they also don't have time for it. He needs to focus on the here and now.

"Do you have eyes on Malcolm?" Oliver asks her instead, just as the elevator doors open.

"Yeah, he's…"

"Nevermind," Oliver says, cutting her off. Malcolm stands outside the

doors, hands in his pockets, looking like he's been waiting for hours instead of a few minutes. He shoots the older man a dark look, biting his tongue to keep himself from asking him where the hell he'd gone - he doesn't care, as long as he's there, as long as he can see him. And he knows he can't trust anything the man says anyway.

Oliver and Sara sweep past him without a word, eliciting a tiny smirk from him as he falls in line with them.

Luck appears to be on their side for once, as they run into no one on their way to the ballroom. And soon enough, empty hallways give way to an enormous, opulent room that's already decorated with entirely too many American flags and a truly absurd number of red and blue balloons. They damn near cover the entire ceiling, attempting to fill the air with a sense of celebration. It's a strange mixture of money and tackiness that would make his mother wince, Oliver absently notes before he catches Malcolm eyeing the gold spray-painted bald eagle center pieces littering the cloth-covered tables with obvious distaste.

It's an unsettling reminder how very alike his mother and Malcolm are at times.

"Isabel's in the building," Felicity informs him. "And she's alone, so yay for that."

"She's here," Oliver relays to the others.

He meets Sara's eyes. She gives him a little nod and drifts to one side of the room to flank the door. It's not really necessary because Isabel isn't the sort to run from a fight, but Oliver assumes it's League of Assassin instinct to block off the exits and ensure their prey is cornered. After all, the ones they go after aren't supposed to escape. This thought is only backed up when Malcolm gravitates to the other side of the door where he can also keep an eye on the side entrance.

For his part, Oliver's a front-and-center kind of guy. He leans back against the center table - the first thing Isabel will see when she enters the room - and stuffs his hands in his pockets. Then there's nothing left but waiting.

There's no room for small talk, no idle chit-chat to chase away the long minutes. The only thing that fills the silence is the idle drift of the balloons and Felicity quietly informing him that his mother just received word from her attorneys that it's complete. It isn't quite 57% - more like 56.692%, not that Oliver really follows Felicity's understanding of it, and not that it matters. It's done. They have the

company back.

No more than thirty seconds after he whispers, "That's good," the steady clip of patent leather heels against the marble floor in the hallway heralds Isabel's arrival.

Oliver doesn't move an inch. He just waits. There's no part of him that wants to stand taller or put himself in a position to make himself look bigger because it's not necessary. Isabel isn't a physical threat to him and they just stole the controlling shares of the QC out from under her. She's already losing by the second.

The doors swing open and she strides in. It's to her credit that she's instantly aware that something's off - she pauses for a fraction of a second, taking in the scene before her. Her eyes shift from him to Sara and then Malcolm. Her lips curl back in a derisive sneer and then she rolls her eyes, finding Oliver again.

"I don't have time for your theatrics, Oliver," she says. She sounds bored, unaffected, but Oliver doesn't miss the subtle shift of her body, or the tightening in her shoulders, meaning she recognizes the threat surrounding her. Interesting. "I have a company to run."

"For the moment." Oliver pushes off of the table. "Believe me, I have things I need to be doing, too."

"Potty training?" Isabel asks in a dryly sarcastic tone.

The hint of anything Ellie-related makes him clench his jaw, but he lets it slide, despite the suddenly vicious urge to clamp her mouth shut *for* her. If he lets her bait him about Ellie this is going to end very differently than he needs it to. Felicity grumbles a quiet curse under her breath from the other side of the comms, a colorful stream of words directed at Isabel. It's satisfying, because he can't - and won't - say it right now.

"You have my sister." The words are simple, quiet, but the intensity behind them is enough to make Isabel falter slightly as Oliver stalks closer to her. She still grins though, a malicious twist of her lips that makes him hate her a little more with every step. "And you're going to give her back to me."

"Suppose I do," Isabel replies, not even bothering to play coy. "You and your very interesting allies… Are you going to make me let her go?" Oliver makes tight fists as she gives Sara a dismissive glance before focusing on Malcolm. "It's been a long time, Malcolm. But then again,

I'm not surprised you'd crawl out of the woodwork to find your daughter."

The pit of Oliver's stomach turns to lead instantly as he jolts in surprise right along with Malcolm.

Isabel's ability to take them by surprise in this - in anything - is something she clearly views as a victory if the full-on grin that spreads across her face is any indication.

"Now *how* did you know *that*?" Malcolm wonders, managing to only sound mildly curious even as he eyes her, obviously regauging her threat level.

"Robert and I didn't have secrets from each other," she replies loftily.

The lead in Oliver's stomach suddenly plummets.

Disdain lines Malcolm's face. "I find that difficult to believe."

But that's not the piece of all of this that strikes Oliver. Not even close.

"My father knew?" Oliver asks. "He knew about Thea?"

"That she wasn't his?" She looks at him with mocking pity. "Of course he knew. He was a fool, not an idiot. And like a fool, he loved her anyway. He was going to leave your mother, leave the company, leave you… but then Thea broke her arm, doing something ridiculous, no doubt."

"She fell off her horse," Oliver says, so quietly barely anyone but Felicity hears. It's unsettling. He knows exactly what she's talking about, remembers Thea's accident, the broken arm that had left her in a cast for most of the summer… and the way his father had rushed to the hospital, late and uncharacteristically frazzled.

"We were at the airport when we got the call. I begged him not to go, but he'd always had such a weak spot for that little girl." Isabel clenches her jaw, her anger rising and it's very, very evident that that wound had never healed, not at all. "He promised me we would leave the next day. But instead, my internship was terminated and he never spoke to me again."

Everything in him wants to deny Isabel's words, call her a liar, but he can't. She wasn't just some girl he fooled around with, some meaningless affair. His father had changed that summer, something

had shifted - it wasn't enough, not by a long shot, but it'd been something. And it was this. God, it makes the fact that he slept with Isabel a thousand times worse. Oliver tamps down the wave of nausea, refocusing on Isabel, trying to ignore the way the puzzle pieces of his father's life are shifting into a completely different picture than he'd once assumed.

"So that's what this is about?" Oliver asks. "He chose us over you."

"She ruined all my plans. *Our* plans," Isabel replies. "She ruined everything. He loved me. I was his soulmate… until she ruined everything." She takes a deep breath, her eyes never leaving Oliver's, and the manic darkness staring back at him almost makes him step back. "Now, at least, she has a chance to be *useful*."

"She's a teenager, Isabel. She's not a part of this."

"She's at the *center* of this, Oliver," Isabel counters. She laughs, and it's equal parts dismissive and mocking, like she sees a picture that Oliver can barely grasp. "She always has been. She was born into this."

"No, she has *nothing* to do with this. This is between you and me." Oliver grits his teeth. "You are going to give her back to me or I'm going to pull Queen Consolidated out from beneath you so fast your head will spin."

He's met with a patronizing smile; she's like a viper, venomous and ready to strike.

"Don't overstate your business savvy, Oliver," she tells him. "We both know you don't have the capital or the know-how to take back the company, or you'd have done it already."

And *oh*, he can't wait to wipe that self-serving smirk right off her face.

"I might not," Oliver says as he steps back, feeling lighter for the first time since she'd entered. "But *we* do. And if you check your messages, I think you'll find we already have."

The smile slowly melts from her lips, the color draining from her face. Isabel watches him for a long second, like she's trying to discern if there's any truth to his words. Whatever she finds must tell her that he believes what he's saying, because she shoves her hand in her jacket pocket, yanking her phone out. Isabel scrolls through her messages and he knows the instant she sees it. Even if he hadn't been certain his mother's plan would work, he would've been able to tell - her body

tenses, her jaw clenching, her knuckles turning white as she nearly crushes her phone as she watches her plans unravel right before her eyes. And it's even better since it's because of his mother, because she'd finally gotten one up on the woman who'd slept with her husband, stolen her company and kidnapped her daughter.

It feels like a hard-won victory.

"So," Felicity whispers in his ear, "we're watching on the security cameras and your mother is smiling. Like an actual real smile. I'm not sure what to do with that."

"It doesn't matter," Isabel says, nearly spitting the words as she stuffs her phone back in her pocket. "Things are already in motion and it takes time for you to get control away from me, time you don't have."

Oliver narrows his eyes, not liking that assertion at all. "This is just the beginning."

"Oh, on that we absolutely agree," Isabel counters.

"I'm not going to stop coming after you," he promises, closing the distance between them again. "Or Sebastian. Not until I have my sister back safely. None of us will." She holds his gaze, not wavering for a second. Oliver dips his head slightly, lowering his voice, "And, Isabel? I really don't think you want to see exactly how many resources I can pool if I have to."

A.R.G.U.S., the League, the Bratva… there's no one he won't call in favors with to save his little sister. He'd do anything - *everything* - to save her.

"Don't be so dramatic," Isabel tells him. She gathers herself, straightening her jacket. The haughty air may be gone, but she's still not giving up any ground. "You have something I want and I have something you want. I'm pretty sure we can meet somewhere in the middle."

He frowns at her tone, but it's Sara who speaks up. "You want to trade?"

"I'm not signing over the company to you again," Oliver says.

"I don't need you to," Isabel informs him, and just like that, her twisted little smile is back. "I already have it and you're never getting it back, no matter how many shares you buy. So no, this isn't about the

company, Oliver."

"Then what do you want?"

"Give me Slade Wilson and I'll give you back your sister."

Oliver freezes. That is the very last thing he'd expected. Ever. He isn't sure what he'd been expecting, but this isn't it. And from the startled gasp on the other end of the comms, Oliver's pretty sure Felicity hadn't been expecting it either. They'd both assumed - hell, they'd *all* assumed - that Isabel would prefer the control, the freedom away from whatever Slade had been planning, the ability to use his resources for her own means.

Not this. Slade is locked away, where he belongs, where he's supposed to *stay*.

He knows about Felicity, about Ellie… His blood turns to acid and it burns through him at the memory of him holding his daughter in his arms. He will never forget the fear on her face, the tears marring her little cheeks, the realization that Slade could do *anything* to her…

"No," Felicity whispers in his ear.

"Slade," he repeats slowly, his voice rough. God, even the thought of him being loose again… "*Why*?"

Isabel shrugs. "Every commander needs a good general." But the gleam in her eye betrays her.

"You can't control them," Malcolm says, seeing right through her. "Your mirakuru army. And you think that Slade can." Isabel slides him a sidelong look and he huffs. "You're a fool."

"Two days from now I'll still be in control of Queen Consolidated and Sebastian will have the mayor's office," Isabel tells him. "We'll have all of the pieces we need to control this city…" She looks at Oliver for emphasis as she says, "Except for Slade." Isabel spares Malcolm one last glance. "And *I'm* not the one who got caught trying to level half the city, so I'm pretty sure you don't get to call me a fool, Malcolm."

"Yet," Oliver hisses at her, drawing her attention back to him.

"What?"

"You haven't been caught *yet*," he clarifies. "But you won't get away

with this forever."

"Because you're going to stop me *and* save the city?" Isabel asks. "Oliver, you can't even save your sister without begging me to help. What makes you think you can save an entire city?"

"I'm not doing it alone," he answers immediately. It's a response completely borne of instinct, something he knows in his gut. He's not alone. How had he ever thought this was a mission he could have undertaken on his own? It'd always been an impossible notion, and it was something he'd been willing to carry with him to his grave, whenever that time came. But not anymore.

Isabel stares at him, her expression sour and distasteful, like she's sucking on a lemon. For a second he thinks she appreciates the gravity of his threat, but then she smirks, dismissing him. The tiny tick of her eyebrow tells him she doesn't put any stock in his words - hell, she looks amused more than anything, which is fine. If she continues to underestimate him, all of this will work out so much better.

"Get me Slade by tonight or you'll never see your baby sister again," Isabel tells him. "And the last memory you'll ever have of her is her calling you a liar and running away from you."

The words cut through him like the finely-wielded knife she intends them to be, but he doesn't rise to the bait. The urge to wipe that smirk off her face is overwhelming, but he ignores it, because they have a bigger problem - how the hell are they going to stretch this out, buy more time to find Thea on their own? Slade's a tremendous threat, blinded or not, but the notion of his sister in Isabel's hands is no less terrifying.

If it really comes down to trading Slade for Thea… he's not sure what he'll do.

Which is why they need *time*.

"I can't make Slade appear out of thin air," Oliver says, and Isabel's face twists with displeasure. "It's going to take me a few days. He's not nearby."

"Well if I were you, I'd hurry," Isabel replies, the words coming out in a distasteful hiss. "My hospitality is running thin."

The menace in those words has Oliver taking a threatening step towards her, barely recognizing Malcolm and Sara following suit on

either side of them.

"If you hurt her…"

"I make no promises, Oliver," Isabel says, tilting her head as if she's not staring down a man who can break her neck in two seconds. "But I'll be generous and extend my timeline. Tomorrow night. Get him to me and I'll give you back your precious sister." She smiles. "And as a show of good faith, I'll throw in Roy Harper."

That completely blindsides him.

"What?" The word's out before he can stop it, before he can fully process what she's just said. Roy? She has Roy? A sharp inhale from Sara echoes the one from Felicity over the comm as he stares at Isabel, trying to connect the pieces… She has Roy. Suddenly the power surge during the press conference makes so much more sense. Slade had stolen the machine, but he hadn't used it. It'd been Isabel, and Roy had been the mirakuru blood bag. This entire time… when they'd all thought Roy had disappeared, fallen into the shadows…

Isabel smirks. "You didn't even know something had happened to him, did you?" Oliver grits his teeth. "We found him at a shelter in Bludhaven. It was pathetic, he didn't even put up a fight." The thought of Roy in a shelter, much less one in Bludhaven, makes his blood run cold. But Isabel doesn't give him the chance to linger. She narrows her eyes. "You have until tomorrow night, Oliver. But no longer."

They stare at each other, the tension in the room rising before Oliver finally nods. He can't say the words, because it's an agreement he isn't sure he means to keep, but at the same time, he isn't sure he doesn't. They can't give up Slade, they *can't*… but they have to find Thea, and they need to do it fast. They need to regroup, to think about this rationally, to come up with a plan to get Thea and Roy back that doesn't involve letting free a madman with an axe to grind against his entire family. If that means he has to search every damn building in the entire city, he'll do it.

"I'll be in touch by noon tomorrow," he says. He gives her a cold smile. "In fact, I'll drop by the office. I'm sure you'll be busy cleaning out your things."

Isabel sneers. "Don't bet on it."

He has no doubt his mother is already making calls to various board members, using decades of influence and uncashed favors to sway

them in his favor. It's not something he wants, not by a longshot, but if it means getting the company back and screwing Isabel in the process, he won't be arguing. If there's one piece in this whole mess that he's confident about it's that they'll wrest control of the company from Isabel. And he doesn't intend to lose it again.

Isabel steps aside, clearly not willing to be the first to leave. "Scurry along now," she says, waving her hands in a dismissive shooing motion. "It seems like you have a lot to do in the next day."

Oliver bites his tongue, resisting the urge to snap back at her or make any kind of threat, which is something that feels a little bit like growth. With a lingering glare, he and Sara turn toward the door, but they both freeze when Malcolm takes another step toward Isabel.

"You would do well to be more careful what enemies you make," he tells her. Isabel draws back her shoulders, squaring her jaw. "I am not Oliver Queen and I have no hesitation about making you pay in very inventive and drawn out ways if you bring harm to my daughter."

"You don't scare me, Malcolm," Isabel replies, but the tight lines of her body tells another story entirely.

Malcolm smiles, and it's filled with a chilly malice that makes Oliver frown. "Then you're a bigger fool than I thought."

"And your opinion means so very much to me Malcolm," she counters sarcastically. "Why don't you skulk on back to whatever hole you crawled out of? You had your chance with this city." She looks at all of them in turn. "You all have. And you failed. Now it's my turn."

Oliver flinches at her word choice, because he *did* fail, at least in part, in his attempt to save the city last spring and hundreds of people paid the ultimate price. But that doesn't mean he has to stop trying, that doesn't mean it's over. If anything, it only serves as one more reason to fight the battles he's chosen. It's not just his father's wrongs he's struggling to right these days, it's his own shortcomings - he cannot and will not win every single conflict. It's amazing how quickly that realization has come over him in the last few weeks, how easy it was to accept now that he has so much more in his life. And just like that, losing doesn't look like he'd once imagined it would. It's not bleeding out in a grimy alley or his body giving out to injuries it just can't bear after he drags himself back to the lair. Failing is living with knowing others aren't because he wasn't a bit faster, a bit smarter, just a touch stronger. It's learning from those failures and working to better

himself so that next time maybe he'll be fast enough, smart enough, strong enough so that he doesn't have to mourn another loss.

"We'll see," Oliver tells Isabel, knowing she doesn't understand failure the way he does, that she only sees victory in terms of power and control. It's why she'll lose. And it's why he'll keep fighting. Without looking away from her, he says, "Let's go."

Oliver turns his back on her, leaving her in the room as he walks out. Sara's instantly at his side and he ses Malcolm doing the same. Oliver looks back, unwilling to let him out of sight again - he can melt away all he wants, but as long as he can keep him in his sights, he will; he has a promise to keep to Felicity on that score. He catches Malcolm turning with a dramatic air that would be ridiculous on anyone else as he follows suit.

He waits until they've rounded the corner and are well out of Isabel's earshot before he lets out a breath of relief that the encounter was over. It hadn't answered anything though - they still didn't know where Thea was, and Isabel had delivered her terms.

Slade.

Oliver closes his eyes briefly, icy cold fear branching out through his chest.

There's no way they can release him, especially to Isabel. There's no telling what he'll do. It doesn't matter if he's blind, he's still as big a threat as before, probably even more so. And he knows about Oliver's family.

But Thea…

He realizes that Felicity has been oddly quiet since Slade's name left Isabel's lips.

"We need Felicity to figure out where she's being held," Sara says, interrupting his train of thought as they make their way to the elevator. She glances at him. "I know you'd do anything for Thea, Ollie, but giving Slade to Isabel is a horrible idea. Tell me you aren't considering it."

"I'll consider anything to save Thea," Oliver replies automatically, without a thought, because it's true, even if it's a bad idea. He looks at her. "And Roy."

He refuses to allow either one of them to be one of his failures. They just have to figure out how to get two birds with one stone. They'd done it before, they can do it again.

"I'm working my computer magic," Felicity says over the comm. The sound of her beautiful voice, full of reassuring confidence, has his fear abating a little. They can do this. "I'm triangulating off of Isabel's phone signals from the last three weeks and I'm running facial recognition on every single recording I can get my hands on for the last three weeks, for Isabel, Blood *and* Thea. And Roy, again, even though that's been running. It might take some time, but we'll find them."

Oliver nods, but it's only a reminder of Isabel's timetable. "We don't have that time, Felicity," he replies roughly, running his hands through his hair.

"I know," she replies quietly, just for him, and he closes his eyes. Her voice trembles slightly, and he knows she's remembering Slade just as well as he is. "I know that, Oliver."

"I have some resources at my disposal that I need to consult," Malcolm says. Oliver glances at him to find his face touched with a stony resolve that he is definitely not comfortable with. "I'll be in touch."

He should probably stop Malcolm from leaving - he should definitely stop him - but they have greater concerns than Malcolm Merlyn at the moment. And besides, maybe his resources will help them. God, the fact that he's actually considering Malcolm a partner in this, using his resources… if that doesn't say everything that needs to be said about this situation, Oliver's not sure what would.

So he says nothing. Oliver just nods at the other man as he turns and heads the other direction towards a side door leading to a stairwell.

The instant he's out of sight, Oliver lets out another heavy breath, scrubbing his face.

"You're juggling a lot right now," Sara says.

"Yeah," Oliver agrees.

Slade. Isabel. Blood. Zoom. Malcolm. There are threats on all sides and danger around every corner, sometimes literally, but some threats are more immediate than others. And it has to be Thea's safe return he prioritizes at the moment. It *has* to. Nothing else is nearly as much

danger. Not yet anyway. He steels himself - he can't think about the future, about the what-if's. He has to focus on this moment, because if he lets himself wonder what might happen if this falls apart… If something happens to Thea… if Slade gets out…

Oliver sighs, giving Sara a wry smile that he knows doesn't reach his eyes. "It's a good thing my coordination is pretty great then."

Sara scoffs at the same time Felicity does and it feels like the sound comes in stereo.

"Let's get back," he says. "Talk to Lyla and Digg, put our heads together and come up with a-"

His very rational plan of action is cut off by a choked gasp in his ear and the fear cliff he'd pulled himself off of is back with a vengeance. The sound is quickly followed by a thin, "*Oh my God,*" from Felicity that sends a chill straight down his spine.

"What? What is it?" he asks. Oliver shoves his hand against his ear, pressing his earpiece closer even though he can hear her perfectly - everything from the rapid fire of her fingers flying over the keyboard to her breathing growing more rapid. He tilts his head, as if that simple act will somehow get him closer to her. "Felicity?"

"Oh *God*," Felicity whispers. "Oh God, oh God, oh God… No, that's…. No, no, *no*."

The anxiety lacing her tone has a surge of adrenaline slamming into him, quickly followed by an ominous sense of terror thrumming through his veins that makes his hands start to shake as he snaps, "Felicity, talk to me." He starts walking faster without conscious thought, Sara taking a moment to match his stride.

When she doesn't answer, he demands more forcefully, "What's wrong?"

"You need to get back," she chokes out. "Now, Oliver. Now, *right* now."

"What is it, what happened? Are you okay?" he asks, breaking into a run. "Is it Ellie? Is someone there?"

He skips the elevator completely, shoving his way through the door to a stairway. He skips steps as he hurries down the flights, dimly aware that Sara is somewhere behind him still. His entire focus is on getting back to the car as fast as possible, getting back to the lair as fast as

possible, to his family to soothe that terrified sound right out of Felicity's voice. His arms ache to hold her, to shield her, to put himself in front of whatever's happening… He just has to get there.

"Felicity!"

The door to the parking garage bangs open against the cement wall and his feet pound the pavement as he runs to where Frank's waiting with the limo. The man sees him running and he instantly has the car in gear, pulling out to meet them.

She's not saying anything and he's about to snap when she whispers, "Oliver…"

It's barely above a whisper, her voice gritty and terrified.

He skids to a stop, his hand landing on the limo to hold him up as that terror he hears in her voice makes his muscles weak.

"Oh God, the entire time," she whispers.

"What?"

"He's been here the entire time and we didn't know it."

Chapter 26

For several minutes the only sound in the lair is the white noise in Felicity's ears.

Zoom. It's Zoom.

He's been here the whole time, lurking at the barrier between realities, slipping along the edges of their time, looking for cracks he can work his way through. She hadn't known, hadn't even suspected, but the evidence is in front of her plain as day now. Dozens of surveillance videos from the manor flit across her screen with that horrible, too-familiar rip in time scarring the peace of room after room of their seemingly safe home.

She feels like she might be sick.

Everyone's doing something productive - planning, strategizing, researching - and normally she would be too but she just *can't.* Not right now. All she can do is sit there, holding Ellie as the little girl slumbers in the safety of her arms. Images from the manor are burned against the backs of her eyelids. She's never going to sleep again. She's never going to let Ellie go, not ever.

"Felicity…" Digg's voice is gentle, but it startles her anyhow. She jumps with a gasp, her heart pounding in her throat.

She hadn't even *heard* him. Great… that's just great. How is she supposed to do anything to protect her daughter from someone who can travel through time when she can't even hear a giant hulk of a man moving towards her? God, she's going to give herself an ulcer. Maybe she already has one.

She barely keeps herself still enough to not wake Ellie, before she sees what he's doing.

"No, wait," she manages but Diggle's already downsizing the program and with a couple more clicks, he's pulling up the facial recognition search so it's up on all three screens. "John-"

"You're only making yourself crazy, Felicity," he replies, his eyes soft with sympathy.

He's… well, he's not wrong. But that doesn't mean it isn't warranted

either.

There's so much she's found, more than she could have ever feared. Sometimes it's just a glimmer, sometimes it's a hand pressing through, testing the limits of the film that seems to separate their realities. Sometimes it's worse. Sometimes it's his grotesquely masked face or his claw-like finger that looks like it just might puncture the near-invisible barrier protecting them all. Usually he gets pulled back, little glimpses of familiar blurs coming to their rescue just like before when Barry and Sara - at least she's assuming it's Sara - had done so in the kitchen. But sometimes he's so close to *stepping through* that Felicity stops breathing.

How had they not known? It was like Zoom had learned from his attempt in the kitchen, knew not to come directly after Ellie, knew he'd find resistance in crossing through at all. And didn't that bring up a whole crapload of questions, such as why the hell Barry could come through with Ellie, but Zoom couldn't even breach through? Was that something new, did that mean Barry couldn't get through anymore? Did that mean Ellie was here permanently?

God, that thought makes her simultaneously joyous and sick to her stomach, because she doesn't want to think about Ellie going back. At the same time, the idea of someday sending her daughter into the past and never seeing her again makes her entire being ache. And what about Ellie? She doesn't belong in this time, and it had been very evident that there was *some* expectation she'd be going home, to her time…

It only makes her headache worse, and that isn't helping anything because each time she catches a glimmer of light from the rip in time, her head throbs more. Whenever she actually *sees* Zoom, it has her insides twisting into knots that feel like they might never untangle.

The feelings roiling in her chest bounce between fear and blinding anger. This monster is chasing her daughter. He wants her so badly that he's literally chasing her through time. And, despite their collective best efforts, he's still trying. He's always been there, pushing at the edges of reality like he's looking for a chink in its armor he can exploit. She's *mad*; mad at whatever the hell is going on in the future that isn't enough to stop him, at herself, at Oliver, at Barry, at *everything*. Because it's *her* daughter who's in danger and, even after all this time, they haven't been able to stop it. And then that all spirals into worry and fear and horror that this is the kind of future they will be giving their child.

It's a vicious cycle, one that Felicity's been going through for the last several minutes.

"I don't know what to do, Digg," she confesses, hating the way her voice sounds so uncertain, so weak. She's not weak, never has been, and she surely doesn't have the luxury of that right now. "How do we even start to fix this?"

"I don't have all the answers," Digg replies, which is a significantly less comforting answer than she'd expected. "But watching that clip over and over again definitely isn't helping. You're okay. Ellie's okay. We've got this. I don't know how yet, but we've got this."

Felicity nods and cuddles Ellie closer. She presses her lips to the top of her daughter's head, breathing her in. She leans back in her chair and rocks slightly in a way that feels instinctive. She's not sure if it's to keep her daughter asleep, lulled in a bubble of safety, or to comfort herself. Probably both. Her hand drifts up and down Ellie's back. She lets the soft curls slide between her fingers, her nails dragging up and down her daughter's spine. It's a soft, comforting pattern her fingers make up all their own. Ellie's breathing deeply, completely content and Felicity vows that she's going to do *everything* in her power to make sure she stays that way, even if she doesn't know where to start right now.

Her foot taps with impatience, as her mind scrambles to come up with a plan, *any* plan that keeps Ellie secure. It hadn't just been glimmers of light and hints of Zoom on that feed, it had been so much more. Their guard had been down and he'd gotten close, *so* close without them even knowing…

The initial glimpse of him had been bad enough. Oliver had gone scarily silent when she'd said, "*It's Zoom. He's been here, the entire time*."

Something in her tone must have clued him in that the threat, while ever-present, wasn't imminent because he didn't panic, didn't demand immediate answers. Instead, what sounded a lot like glass breaking had come through the comm before Oliver had said gruffly, "*We're coming home*."

But then the scene on her monitor had changed and it was all suddenly so, *so* much worse.

Her blood had run cold, and she'd had to bite her lip to keep silent. As it'd unfolded before her, she'd curled around Ellie, hiding her daughter's slumbering little face in the crook of her neck, hugging

Ellie so tightly she'd worried she might wake her.

The scene before her should have been ideal, picturesque even. She can remember when it happened, a lazy afternoon the week prior. She'd been off somewhere with her mother, leaving Oliver and Ellie to their own devices after a long morning of swimming. They'd started out watching TV, but Ellie had quickly fallen asleep on her father's lap. He'd shifted, laid down across the sofa with Ellie sprawled across his broad chest. He'd lasted barely a minute before his eyes had fallen shut too, with his little girl safe in his arms. Ellie looked so tiny, so secure, so absolutely at peace… until a glimmer of light had ruined the tranquility of the moment.

A rip in time had sliced through the empty air, a jagged cut that was exactly like what they'd seen in the kitchen. But that isn't close to the worst of it. No, the worst of it is the way Zoom's hand had been reaching through, his clawed hand hovering over Ellie's head.

There'd been the thinnest film of reality still separating them, some kind of barrier in time, but it *looked* like he was touching her. It *looked* like her curls were snagged on his talon-like nails. And just the sight of that had made a visceral sense of terror and denial shoot right through Felicity, setting her teeth on edge and heightening her senses in a way that left her primed to defend her daughter. But the danger hadn't been present. Not really, not then. And on the screen in front of her, something had yanked Zoom back, the breech sealing in his absence, leaving Oliver and Ellie none-the-wiser.

The second he'd disappeared, Ellie had shifted slightly, nuzzling against her father's chest and gripping his shirt tightly in her little fist. Oliver had wrapped his arms around her more securely, letting her settle before they both fell into a deeper sleep.

With a ragged gasp, fighting to keep calm, to not disturb Ellie, she'd pushed her comm into her ear and whispered, "*Oliver, hurry*."

He'd heard the change in her voice immediately and with a rough, "*Always*," he'd told Frank to go faster.

Felicity had stared at her family, trying to grasp the fact that it could have been taken away *just like that* in the blink of an eye, when a tiny noise over her shoulder had sounded. She'd turned so fast she'd had to grip the arm of her chair to steady herself, but it'd only been Digg and Lyla with pinched looks of concern that they weren't good enough at concealing. They knew. They knew how close Zoom had come, how

close he'd been.

How close he still was.

It'd sent her spiraling, falling into the desperate desire to see how many other close calls there'd been. When, where, how…

How often had Zoom been there while they'd slept? They didn't need a camera in the bedroom. It hadn't seemed necessary. How many times had they been sleeping peacefully and Zoom had been *right there*?

Now, Felicity looks up at Digg like she's waiting for answers he doesn't have, but he's every bit as uncertain as she is, every inch as worried. He has very little comfort to give in this moment. They've been hunted for *weeks* and they hadn't even noticed. None of them had. Not Digg, not the hired security, not Lyla, not even Oliver.

It *terrifies* her.

As if Ellie can feel it, she nuzzles her little nose into Felicity's throat. She's holding on even in her sleep, her hand curled in Felicity's sleeve. It's only when the toddler moves that Felicity feels the steady drip of drool her daughter's leaving on her shoulder.

It's strange, but that centers her. How is it that *drool* makes her chest grow tight with love and warmth? It's not really the puddle Ellie's left against her collarbone. She knows that. It's that her daughter is right there, in her arms, all soft breaths, vibrant energy… *life*.

She's where she belongs.

"If you keep jittering like that, you're going to wake her up." Digg nods down at Ellie and Felicity furrows her brow, looking first to her daughter, then to her own foot bouncing on the ground. She hadn't even realized she was doing it. Diggle touches her shoulder, pulling her attention back to him. "And we both know how cranky Ellie gets without her sleep."

Felicity can hear the 'like mother, like daughter' in his tone and she knows he's doing it just to lighten the mood. It doesn't work, exactly, but she appreciates the effort. She smiles at him.

"I'm just…"

She doesn't have words.

Diggle nods. "I know. But we got this. Okay?"

Felicity barely manages a nod before turning back to her computers. She watches the facial recognition program flip through the thousands of pictures and hundreds of camera feeds, slowly putting together the picture of where Isabel has been over the last several weeks.

The good news is that a pattern is slowly emerging, as the computer logs Isabel's whereabouts. But that's the only good news at the moment and Felicity is keenly aware that they could use a whole lot more.

She closes her eyes for a moment, hoping for more, wishing for luck, longing for a break so they can all *breathe*.

Her eyes are shut for a split second too long, because in that instant, she sees Zoom's hand reaching through, nearly breaking the barrier separating him from Ellie. With a startled jump, her eyes snap back open. She gasps, looking around wildly, her heart jumping into her throat as her head whips back and forth in search of a threat that isn't even there.

At least as far as she can see.

"Hey, you okay?" Diggle asks, his hand finding her shoulder again.

Felicity nods, biting the inside of her lip because the nod is a lie and it sits sourly on her tongue.

For what feels like the hundredth time since she told Oliver to hurry - really, since he'd left in the first place - she wants him here with her. She's not sure if she wants to see him more just to confirm with her own eyes that he's okay or to feel his arms around her, for him to tell her that this changes nothing, that they're going to be okay.

The rational side of her is saying she's being ridiculous. Having Oliver there isn't going to make the danger any less real.

But it'd make her feel better.

She just really, really needs him there.

Now.

The stray thought, '*Okay, his fears about me make a little more sense now,'* enters her mind, and she shakes her head slightly, huffing out an

annoyed laugh. She'd been right earlier, about him needing to trust that she could be by herself and be fine. But now that she's actually *seen* how ever-present the danger really is… Well, she doesn't want to be alone any more than she wants him alone. No, she doesn't want him out of her sight, just like Ellie.

"Actually no, I'm not okay," she says finally in response to Digg, feeling ever-so-slightly better at the admission. "But I have to be." She looks up at him, her hand covering his to convey her gratitude. "I'm really glad you're here."

"Nowhere else I'd rather be." Diggle smiles, and it's a little sad. "Gotta keep all my girls safe."

Felicity's return smile isn't much better, probably even sadder, but at least it's there.

He squeezes her shoulder in reassurance before nodding behind him, just as Lyla sidles up next to them.

"We had a thought about Slade," Diggle says, his voice low as he shifts gears, bringing her something she *can* deal with.

Just like with Zoom, Slade's name will never fail to make Felicity shiver. She's sure of it. But she's also incredibly grateful for the distraction - and *wow* does that say something about her day if thinking about Slade is a relief. If she's left to her own devices much longer, she might go insane.

Felicity sits up, careful not to jostle the three-year-old too much as she looks at Digg and then Lyla. "What about him?"

"How close are they to getting that cure worked up over at S.T.A.R. labs?" Digg asks.

It's another reminder of all the things she should have been doing instead of combing through security footage for Zoom.

Felicity turns to look at her phone, half-expecting it to light up and answer for her, but it remains silent. "I don't know," she says, pressing the button. She doesn't have any new messages. "But I can ask. Why?" The second she asks that, it hits her. It's a testament to how distracted she is that she didn't connect the dots sooner. "Wait, you're thinking that if - and that's still a really huge if, because we could still find Thea and Roy and make this all a moot point - but, if we do turn Slade over to Isabel, we could dose him first?"

She completely forgets her comm is on until she hears Oliver's soft grunt on the other end.

"It would take care of the mirakuru issue," Diggle says, "and Lyla had an idea on top of that, one that would work a helluva lot better without that freaky juice in his system." Felicity furrows her brow in question, looking at Lyla as Digg continues, "Remember my adventures with Amanda Waller and her little 'Suicide Squad' a few weeks back?"

"Yeah. Going undercover, giant vats of a really scary nerve agent, and the unexpected saving of Floyd Lawton's life. Kind of a big night for you guys." Felicity makes a face. "And I definitely remember the huge global freakout that happened when that bomb dropped over there. That Amanda Waller seems super drone-happy."

"You're not wrong." Diggle huffs out an unamused chuckle at that. "That bomb she dropped was following the chip that was buried in Floyd Lawton's neck, at the base of his spine. Which is why it didn't hit the house."

"What?" Felicity blinks. "You never told us that."

"Well, I didn't want to freak you out." Felicity snorts but Diggle ignores her. "The only reason we survived is because Lyla dug the chip out, which is an experience that Waller learned from. It was also a bomb itself. She'd used it on another member of the team when they'd tried to escape."

"She blew somebody up?" Felicity asks. "Like she blew somebody's head up?" She blinks. "Are you saying there's a bomb buried in Slade Wilson's neck right now?"

"No," Lyla answers. "Waller found a new spot for it, somewhere it's not so easy to remove from: at the base of the spine. So he does have one, but it's implanted in his spinal cord."

"Hang on," Felicity interrupts, sitting up a little more fully. She holds Ellie against her as she asks, "So he'd be, what? A Trojan Horse?" She lowers her voice to a harsh whisper, "Are we really talking about blowing him up? I mean… yeah, he kinda deserves. Alright, he really deserves it. I hate him. He's a threat. I want him dead. But still, that's seems a little…"

The sound of a door opening cuts her off.

Oliver.

All three of them spin as the sound of footsteps on the stairs echo through the foundry.

Oliver had been on the comm the entire time. He'd heard her, heard their conversation, *knew* they were alright. But his eyes still fly around the room, assessing everything before they find her. When they do, he lets out a heavy breath, one she's fairly certain he'd been holding since she told him about that first glimpse of Zoom.

The relief that fills his face when he finds them both okay makes her heart beat faster and her stomach flip. He's fine, too. He's here and he's *fine*. Even though she'd known that she'd needed to see that, she hadn't quite realized how much. But there's also a new unease. Because things have changed now, for the worse. It'd been hard enough separating earlier; what will it be like now that they know for sure they aren't safe anywhere?

He moves toward her just as Felicity stands.

It's silly how much better she feels having Oliver there as Diggle and Lyla step back to make room. She wants to tell Oliver they're fine, that *everything's* fine - that they just need to be more careful, more aware - that they can handle this. But she can't, because she doesn't know that. None of them do.

"Hi," she says instead, her voice wavering slightly.

"Hey," he replies softly, before wrapping one arm around his family, cupping her cheek with the other. He pulls her against him, his lips finding hers. Felicity sighs, leaning into him, completely letting go of the tension that's been knotted around her throat for the last twenty minutes or so. It's such a *relief* knowing he's there. Oliver holds her, holds both of them. His hand slides down the side of her throat, his fingers curling against the back of her neck, like he's assuring himself she's there. His presence, his hand on her skin, It does that exact same thing for her.

He pulls back sooner than she'd like.

"Are you okay?" he asks. His voice echoes over her comm. He clicks his off before brushing his fingers over her shoulder, his other hand cupping the back of their daughter's head. Felicity fights the urge to shudder, hating that all she thinks about when she sees that is Zoom's hand in a twisted mimicry of the same exact thing.

"Yeah," Felicity says. Her stupid voice cracks. He hears it, his grip on her tightening and she shakes her head. "We're okay. Just a little freaked out."

It's an understatement, a massive understatement, and he knows it. He heard her reaction when she first saw the glimmer, and now she's wondering if she'd gasped or made noises each time she found a new one. And then when she found the one that currently has a ball of lead sitting in her chest cavity...

"We're fine," she says and Oliver takes a slow breath, closing his eyes. She envies him that luxury, knowing he won't have it any more than she does when he sees what she's found.

In fact, as she watches him decompress before her, she envies him for a lot more.

He's not *nearly* as freaked out as she is. He's Diggle levels of freaked, which tells her that they'd probably talked at some point while she was spiraling in front of her computer. They must have. He wouldn't be this settled if they hadn't talked about what Zoom might be doing, where he might be, about tactics and strategy. She wants to be annoyed that this obviously didn't include her, but she's not, not right now at least. Because Zoom *trying* a few times here and there is so very different than the dozens of incidents she's already found. And that's not even considering the places they don't have cameras. Like their bedroom.

Suddenly the thought of seeing that video again - of Oliver seeing it, of *all* of them seeing it - has a thread of anxiety lacing through her chest. He doesn't know the specifics, he doesn't know where or when, or that he was *right there* when it was happening…

Felicity grips Ellie tighter, looking back at the computer screens, already talking before her brain can catch up with her head.

"I haven't been able to establish a pattern for where Thea might be," she says, the words coming out a little too abruptly. "Or Roy. Well, her and Roy. Although that's assuming they're even in the same location, because we don't know that. Oh, that's a thought, I hadn't even considered that. But… it is working, assuming Isabel sees them, which she has to. At least Thea. Right? She's the sort to show up and gloat a lot. It's working, I think. It is getting closer to *something*, anyhow, but what the something is remains a little confusing. It's like Isabel knew we'd do this, so she's going *everywhere* and *nowhere* at the same time-"

Her ramble has a point, obviously. Rescuing Thea and Roy is imminent on their to-do list, but it's also a way of distracting herself. From Zoom. From the ever-present danger their child is in.

And Oliver knows it.

"Hey," he interrupts. "It's okay."

"No," Felicity instantly replies, shaking her head. "It's not. It's not okay, Oliver."

She looks at him and the burn of tears has her closing her eyes before any of them can fall, but not fast enough to miss the way his face crumples slightly. And then she's seeing Zoom practically touching Ellie's head in her mind again and her eyes fly open.

"Hey…" Oliver cups her cheek again, his thumb running across the delicate skin under her eye. "It's not like we didn't expect something like this. There's a reason why you and Ellie were never alone. In case he tried again."

"It's not that," she says, despite how much she wishes it was. "I mean, it is that, but it's… not." She stares at him. "There's more."

His face darkens. His eyes dance over her features, reading her like a book. His brows draw together and she wishes she'd never seen what she had. "What is it?" he asks.

Ellie chooses that exact time to wake up.

She shifts, gripping Felicity's blouse tighter, not bothering to lift her head as she says with a sleep-laden voice, "Hi, Daddy."

Oliver's face instantly transforms, becoming lighter. He looks like he doesn't have a care in the world that doesn't revolve around his family and the change is both heartwarming and startling considering the way he'd just been looking at her. He smiles, leaning down so he's eye-level with Ellie, cupping her face the same way he is Felicity's. "Hey, Ellie-bug."

"Is the bad man gone?" she asks.

Felicity starts, her head instantly flying up. She hadn't even thought about Malcolm, or Sara. She'd only had eyes for Oliver. She looks around, finding Sara - who gives her a little wave - but no Malcolm. That makes her uneasy.

"He's not here anymore," Oliver answers. It's vague as hell on purpose, and even though Felicity wants to ask, she keeps her mouth shut. A new vehemence fills his voice as he adds, "He won't ever get you, Ellie. Okay? You or your mommy. Not ever. Nobody will. I won't let them."

Felicity stares at him. He's not talking about Malcolm, not anymore. Oliver's eyes never leave Ellie's, who doesn't respond for a long moment. Felicity can feel her fidgeting slightly, trying to decide if she should believe him.

Ellie finally nods. "Okay."

Oliver's smile grows. "Okay." He holds his hands up. "Can I have a hug?"

Ellie nods again and then she's practically leaping towards Oliver. He catches her with ease, chuckling softly as she wraps herself around him. Felicity feels weirdly lost without her daughter in her arms, and it's one hundred percent because of what she just saw, but the sight of her - really, it's the actual *sight* of her - with Oliver fills that space. Wiping Ellie's drool away, Felicity watches them. He's whispering something in Ellie's ear, something Felicity can't hear and Ellie's nodding, whispering something back to him.

And then he looks at Felicity, whispering louder so she can hear. "We need to get Mommy in on this."

Ellie nods with a quiet, "Mmhmm," as Felicity asks, "Get Mommy in on what?"

"Ellie kiss!" Ellie shouts, her voice rocketing through the lair as she throws her arms open.

The giant smile on the toddler's face is contagious and it's *impossible* not to respond. Felicity grins as she walks into their open arms. They share a kiss, just like they always do after 'missions,' and, for the moment, it's perfect.

Ellie starts telling Oliver about her baby doll, about how she needs to get her up from her nap now. Felicity sees Moira pacing on the far side of the room, still on the phone, waving at Oliver. She hears Oliver responding to Ellie, catches Diggle and Lyla talking in quiet tones, reminding her that there's so much to do, to discuss, to plan…

She lets herself not care for a moment. Her family is in her arms and

that's all she needs.

Felicity takes a deep breath, stepping closer into Oliver's embrace, closing her eyes. Before she can even try to think about something else, she sees Zoom's hand touching Ellie and her eyes snap open. It's just like earlier. God, will she *ever* be able to shut her eyes again without that image attacking her mind's eye?

Oliver feels her stiffen and he presses a kiss to the top of her head. "How about you go get your baby doll?" he offers Ellie.

"Not alone," Felicity instantly adds, her head jerking up.

Oliver squeezes her closer, taking her outburst in stride.

She lets out a breath - he has no idea.

"I'll go with you, munchkin," Sara says as she comes up. She wiggles her eyebrows. "Should we take the Waverider to get her?"

Ellie's eyes widen as she takes an excited deep breath. "Yeah!"

"Alright," Sara says. Oliver and Felicity part so he can put Ellie down. The toddler instantly attaches herself to Sara, jumping up and down with excitement at the prospect. Sara leans down. "You ready?"

"Yes!" And then they're off, Sara hauling Ellie up and over her head. Ellie flings her arms out like she's flying as Sara starts zig-zagging through the space, making their way back to the cot where she'd left her doll. Her squeals of delight follow them but the joy on their side is short-lived when Oliver turns to Felicity, his face somber.

"Can I see it?"

"Which one?" Felicity immediately asks. He frowns and his face falls more with each passing second as she says, "It's not just one, Oliver; it's dozens. There's the ones where it's just a little glimmer thing, like barely anything, and then there's the ones like what happened in the kitchen, and then…"

He narrows his eyes when she stops.

Felicity opens her mouth to continue, but she doesn't even want to say it. It'd be different, she realizes, if it'd been her with Ellie, or Digg or Sara or even Lyla… but when he finds out it was him who'd been lying there, with Zoom so close, close enough that he could have

wrapped his hands around Ellie…

Oliver laces his fingers with hers. "What'd you see?"

She doesn't get the chance to reply though, because suddenly Digg is there.

"I know we have a lot of things on our plates right now, guys," Diggle says, "more than we can chew. But if we're going to get a move on finding Thea, we've gotta talk strategy. And that includes Slade."

Oliver's eyes don't leave Felicity's for a long moment, but then he glances at Diggle with a sharp nod. Because this is more important for the moment. It has to be.

"Yeah." Oliver tugs on Felicity's hand as he asks, "Is there anything we work off from your searches? An area we can hit? Somewhere we can canvas? At least then we can start looking for her. For her and Roy." He pinches his lips together. "I can't believe she's had Roy this entire time."

"That wasn't your fault," Felicity tells him.

"I didn't have to let him leave."

"Like you could have stopped him?" she asks. "At least Isabel told us. Not her smartest move, although she's arrogant enough to think it's a good play."

"Yeah, but to what end?" Oliver asks. He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. We're getting both of them. We just have to hope that they're at least in the same location, or same area. We can't let her be tipped off that we're coming after them if we grab one and the other is somewhere else. There's no telling what she'd do." Dropping Felicity's hand, he scrubs his face with a loud exhale. "We don't have a lot of time. And I want this done. I don't want to waste what little time we do have by trying to outmaneuver her."

"Wait." Felicity furrows her brow. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we need to get Slade and we need get that cure." He looks at Diggle, who nods. "Now."

"Tell me you're not actually thinking of giving Slade to Isabel Rochev," she says, her voice rising. "Mirakuru or not - blind or not - he's one of the most dangerous men on this planet. And not just because he's

scary good at hurting people, but because he knows about Ellie."

He holds up a hand. "I know that-"

"Do you?" Felicity challenges. She takes a step back, crossing her arms over her stomach. She doesn't see Oliver's concerned frown at her movements. Instead, she shakes her head, aware that she's talking a little too loudly but unable to stop. "Because that's what we need, isn't it? Two raving lunatics chasing after our daughter, one who can travel through *time* and one who is so hellbent on destroying your life that he wouldn't blink twice about hurting our little girl. He had her, Oliver, and-"

"And now Isabel has Thea, Felicity," he cuts in. "She's every bit as dangerous right now. I can't just do nothing. And until your searches come up with something concrete, we need a backup plan. As of right now, that backup plan is Slade." Her mouth snaps shut with an audible click and Oliver steps towards her. "I won't let anything happen to our daughter. I promise."

"I know that," Felicity snaps. "But how can we promise anything when our actions are making the world a more dangerous place for her? I know you will do everything in your power to protect her, and me, but what about you? Slade almost killed you last time. And Ellie, she… she started disappearing. It'd be like we're doing Zoom's job for him. I guess that's one way to stop him."

Oliver can only stare at her, his face inscrutable.

Freeing Slade was a huge *if*. It wasn't anything she'd thought they'd really consider. They're supposed to track Thea down, get her home safely, all the while defeating Isabel and her mirakuru army… somehow. That's the only option. And while she realizes on some rational level how unbelievably naive her assumption makes her sound, she doesn't care. She can't handle both Slade and Zoom. Separately they're nearly too much to handle. With both threats in the open at once… well, she can't begin to imagine how to cope with that.

She sees the moment strategy takes over in Oliver's eyes, and despite herself, it pisses her off.

He turns away from her, finding Lyla, "How far away is Slade?"

"A few hours out," Lyla responds. Felicity's eyes fly to her. The other woman returns her look with a calculated sympathy that she might have understood on any other day. Probably a day she wasn't a

mother who just watched a man trying to literally break through the fabric of time over and over to get her child. "I already had him sedated and transferred. He's shackled and in an underground containment room at a secure location until we get the cure."

He nods. "And how far out are they on the cure?" Oliver asks Felicity.

Felicity stares at him, and he returns her look steadily. He's not wavering - this is the plan, and it's better than both no plan or a contingency-less plan. Their contingency is that cure. And they need it. Now. Even though parts of her want to fight it tooth and nail.

"I'll ask," she replies shortly.

"Thank you," Oliver says. He looks like he wants to say more, but she's not sure she can hear it right now so she turns around immediately, reaching for her phone.

She can feel his eyes on her as she unlocks her screen. Her hands are shaking slightly and she lets out a quick huff of irritation - with *herself* - when she has to punch in the code more than once.

As Oliver asks Lyla about the logistics of having Slade on-site - having him anywhere *near* any of them again makes Felicity want to retch - she types out a quick S.O.S. text to Cisco and Caitlin. Once it's sent, she closes her eyes. She immediately grimaces at the images waiting for her, and it only fuels the near-desperate need to keep the security risks regarding her daughter as low as possible. And that only makes her feel guilty, and angry, and aggravated and… *crazy*.

Her phone buzzing has her eyes flying to the screen to see Cisco's message: '*Think we got it. Got something anyhow, but without original sample, hard to tell. It's synthesizing now. Need a few hours. Or more of that freaky-deaky mirakuru, preferably sans blood. Will send when ready.'*

Felicity feels Oliver behind her before he can say anything.

"Cisco said they have the cure," she says. "They need a few hours though."

"Good," is all he says.

For a second, that's it. She can hear Sara and Ellie somewhere, talking loudly, giggling even louder, and the sound is soothing, as much as the low chatter from Lyla and Moira on their phones.

And then Oliver moves.

"Talk to me," he whispers, his hands finding her waist. "Is this about Zoom?" That name makes her chest constrict and she pushes that subject away again. He pulls her back against his chest, moving to wrap his arms around her, like he wants to protect her from the fear he probably saw earlier. "He was close, wasn't he?"

Fear freezes her tongue. Fear, and the weirdest and fiercest urge to protect him from it.

"I'm sorry," she says instead, turning to face him. When his brow furrows in question, her hands land on his chest. "I know Thea is our first concern right now. Thea and Roy. And they *are* our first concern. My first concern. Because they're the ones in immediate danger. It's just…" She looks at him. "When it comes to Ellie, Oliver, the things I'm willing to do to ensure her safety…"

Especially after what she'd seen.

"I know," he replies. "And I get it, Felicity, I do. The idea of Slade being out there again… I don't even want to think about it. But if this is how I can save Thea, and if we can get him that cure… I can't lose my sister. I won't. But if it will give us an advantage over Isabel, I'm doing it. It's better than nothing."

"It is. It really is." Felicity's grip his suit jacket for emphasis. "And this is so not the time for me to start freaking out like that. This is hard enough-"

"It's always going to be hard, Felicity," Oliver interrupts, pressing his forehead to hers. "And I'd rather you yell at me than not tell me how you feel."

"Even if how I feel is really counterproductive to what we're currently doing?"

He huffs out a small chuckle. "Especially then." Oliver pulls back with a sigh. "I don't plan on giving her Slade, that's the last thing I want. But I need him here in case something goes wrong, in case we don't find them. But I know you will." He gives her a smile, one that is so full of confidence in her abilities that she almost starts to believe she can as well. There's dozens of algorithms she could try… she's just been a little distracted the last few minutes. That makes her feel guilty all over again, and she's glad when Oliver lets her go, turning to face her screens. "How are the searches?"

Felicity turns with him, bringing up the current search patterns. She points at the screen. "It's narrowed down to this area. It's pretty much the southeast corner of the Glades, and while it's not the *entire* Glades, it's still a huge chunk. It'd take you way too long to look through all of it."

"Can you narrow it down?"

"Yeah," Felicity answers with ease.

Ignoring her chair for the moment, she leans over, typing in new parameters, her brain jumping ahead of itself with the new task. She should've thought of it herself, and she would have, she knows that. If she hadn't been so distracted by Zoom, by that damned footage…

Ellie laughs at something in the background and Felicity's gaze darts back to her daughter, a giggling ball of joy who is trying to tickle an actual assassin into submission. Sara's a good sport about it, putting her hands up in mock submission, but it all only underscores Ellie's innocence - how badly they need to preserve that, keep her safe.

For an instant, she's ready to spiral back down that black hole of terror Zoom left in his wake. Her hand hesitates as the mouse hovers over that little minimized window with so much damning evidence of precisely how bad things really are.

"Felicity… I need to see it."

Her hands falter for a second, her fingers stuttering over a few of the keys.

She looks over to see the sad but firm look on Oliver's face and she knows instantly this isn't about the search for Thea. This is about Zoom. He doesn't know what 'it' is yet, doesn't know what he's asking, but he knows it's big, knows it's out there.

"That's…" Felicity looks back to her new code entries, finishing them up, barely having to pay attention, the code already written in her mind. As she completes the algorithms for the facial recognition search, she says, "You really don't. I think maybe if we just-"

Before she gets the rest of the words out, he's leaning over and, with a few keystrokes, he's bringing up the minimized window again.

As much as she might have wanted to spare him this, deep down she'd known they'd have to face this together, that she'd have to see it all

again, but that doesn't make this moment any easier. Nothing can make seeing these videos easier.

The playbacks are in order of the way she found them. Oliver's stock still, his eyes on the screen, seeing everything she had. When Felicity looks up at him, she knows he didn't honestly believe it was like *this*.

Pressing her lips together, knowing what he's going to see, she steps closer to him, her hand landing on his arm. His muscles are taut as he curls his hands into tight fists, watching each new Zoom sighting. It's just as bad as the first time. Before she can think twice, Felicity steps closer to him, winding her arms around his waist from behind, watching around his arm.

He's not breathing.

Felicity glances back, making sure Ellie isn't anywhere close. It's just them.

She knows the exact moment he sees it - the image of him and Ellie on the sofa, sleeping - because he jerks. Her eyes fly back to the screen as Oliver freezes. It's only when the empty air next to where he's laying with Ellie splits - *something* coming from absolutely *nothing* - that he inhales sharply, his hand flying up to her arm, his fingers digging into her.

Felicity presses herself flush against him, resting her cheek on his bicep. She's already watched it, she doesn't need to watch it again, but she can't look away. She watches it with him, feeling like she's seeing it again for the first time through him. It's just as terrifying, just as *real* as when she'd watched it on her own. One of her hands drops down, taking his where it hangs by his side. The instant her fingers find his, he grips her so hard it hurts.

Oliver's perfectly still. The only indication that he's reacting to what he's watching is his grip on her hand and arm tightening. She doesn't realize she's holding him back just as tightly, her teeth clenched to keep herself still, until he suddenly moves.

The second he sees Zoom pressing through, so close to Ellie - all with him *right there* completely unaware - he snaps. He jerks like he's been electrocuted and she looks up at him, whispering, "Oliver…" But the rest of her words fade away when she sees the look on his face, something she's never seen before.

Felicity shivers, tightening her grip on him, but it's like she's not even

there.

All he sees is the screen… and then, in the blink of an eye, he's spinning away from her.

"Ellie!" His voice isn't loud, but there's a sharp urgency there. It echoes through the entire foundry, making her jump. "Ellie!"

He takes a stutter-step towards where Sara had taken her. Felicity follows him… but they aren't there anymore. Her own fear jacks up at that and she's suddenly moving in front of him, her heels echoing her loud, "Ellie?"

The tentative patter of her feet sound, followed by a soft, "Yeah?"

They turn as one just as Ellie appears from the far side of the foundry. Her eyes are wide, her cheeks ruddy with alarm, her body tense, responding to the undercurrent in their voices. That has Felicity's stomach hollowing out for a different reason because she obviously knows that sound, understands what it means.

Oliver's already moving towards her with a, "There you are, baby." He swoops her up, hugging her close. He wraps his arms around her, cradling her, pushing his face into her neck, his hand covering the back of her head. She holds on instinctively, wrapping her little arms around his head, somehow just *knowing* that this is something he needs. He lets out a shuddery breath, carrying her back over to Felicity. Sara and Moira appear, from the same direction Ellie had come. They don't get a chance to say anything as Oliver whispers, "I'm so glad you're okay, sweetie."

"I'm okay," Ellie says. "Me and Gramma and Big Sara are playing hide and seek with my baby doll." In an exaggerated whisper, she adds, "She's still hiding."

"Good, that's good." Oliver laughs, but it comes out in a choked gasp. "I'm glad you're having fun."

Ellie pulls back and Oliver reluctantly lets her, but just enough so they can see each other. She frowns, her hands landing on his cheeks. "Do you need another hug, Daddy?"

"Yeah," Oliver whispers, his voice cracking, "I do. Can I have one?"

With a determined nod, Ellie latches onto him, hugging him with all her might.

Tears burn Felicity's eyes as she watches them and she sniffles, biting her tongue to keep them at bay. She ignores Sara's, "Okay, what'd we miss?" as she and Moira step closer.

She only has eyes for Oliver and Ellie.

"Better?" Ellie asks.

He laughs again and nods, squeezing his eyes shut, holding her as tight as he dares. "Much better. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she replies.

"I'm never letting you go, Ellie-bug," Oliver whispers. "Not ever." He takes a deep breath, hugging her even tighter as he repeats, "Not ever." And then he's pulling back, urging her to do the same so he can look at her as he says, "I won't let anything happen to you, okay?"

"You don't have to keep saying it, Daddy," Ellie replies, and the vexation in those words has Felicity laughing, because it's so perfectly Ellie. "I know that." Felicity covers her mouth as the toddler sits up, trying to make herself look taller. She pulls her shoulders back, using Oliver for balance as she adds, "And I won't let anything happen to you, too."

A tear slips down Felicity's cheek and she wipes it away.

"Well, good," Oliver says. "That makes me feel very safe."

"You make me safe, too, Daddy."

Oh, *that* slices right through Felicity.

"Thank you," Oliver whispers, and then he looks up at Felicity. Resolve hardens his face, making him look stern, but it does absolutely nothing to outshine the love in his eyes.

There's a few feet separating them but they might as well not exist. They are in this together - no matter what. She'd known that's what she'd see in him once he finally saw the footage, just like she knows he won't let Zoom get them, not if there's a breath left in his body to fight it. But seeing is believing and the look on his face has her biting her lip so hard it nearly bleeds.

Oliver closes the distance between them, enveloping her with his free arm, pulling her into his chest again. Felicity wraps herself around

him, her whisper barely audible as she says, "I can't stop thinking about our room, Oliver, about if he…"

"Hey," he says, cutting her off. He looks down at her, brushing his hand over her hair, his thumb slipping over her cheek to wipe away a tear she hadn't felt. God, she'd thought it was bad a few weeks ago when she'd only had Ellie in her life for a few *days*. Weeks in and the thought of anything happening to her is incomprehensible. Oliver cups her cheek. "We're okay now though, and we're going to stay that way. That's all that matters."

She nods, leaning into his palm. "I'm never sleeping again," Felicity whispers. "Not ever again."

He gives her a sardonic chuckle. "Yeah, me either." Oliver shakes his head, because it's a stupid declaration and they both know it. But this changes things, a lot.

"Maybe we can start a fun sleepover tradition," Felicity says, just needing to *talk*. She pushes her face into his chest, muffling her voice. Oliver presses his face to the top of her head as she adds, "Where there are plenty of cameras and booby traps and where we take rotations and…"

"Alright," Sara interrupts, holding up her hands. She glances at the computer screens, but they're empty. Felicity hadn't stopped the playback of the saved Zoom images and now that it's over, all that's left is an empty screen. The movement of other programs make it look like a black hole, which is extremely appropriate for how Felicity feels when she thinks about that shot of Oliver and Ellie. Sara steps closer. "You guys are officially freaking me out. What happened?"

Oliver and Felicity break away, but not before sharing a look. Felicity glances at Ellie, who looks content as can be in her father's arms, not willing to move. She knows Oliver isn't about to put her down anytime soon. She so gets that feeling; nothing could have pried her daughter from her arms a few minutes ago. Nothing except for her child's father, she realizes. Felicity knows without a doubt that if Oliver wasn't there, she'd still be holding Ellie.

"Is this about…" Sara pauses, waiting for everyone to look at her. Oliver angles away so Ellie can't see her as she mouths, '*Zoom?'*

"What?" Moira asks. She shoots Oliver a startled look before her eyes fall on Felicity. "What happened?"

Oliver looks at Felicity. "She didn't see it?"

"No," Felicity replies. "Digg and Lyla did, but Moira was on the phone when I caught it."

"Caught what exactly?" Moira asks, her voice sharp enough to make Felicity feel slightly chastised, like how dare she not share this with her. Felicity's on edge enough that she almost responds, but she bites the tip of her tongue.

"And what else did you see?" Sara adds.

Felicity moves to the computers again as Oliver says, "I'm gonna go find John and Lyla." She glances as he holds Ellie closer. "I can't… I don't want Ellie to see it."

"See what?" the little girl asks before looking at Felicity. "Did you find more Rascal, Momma? I thought they were still drawing him."

"No, honey," Oliver replies, his face softening as he looks at his daughter. He turns away, not really knowing where he's going, just needing to get away. "It's nothing." He pauses, glancing back, his eyes meeting Felicity's before he looks at Sara.

The blonde nods. "I got her, Ollie."

He doesn't leave right away, but after a minute, he finally nods and then he goes.

Sara and Moira crowd around Felicity as she hits play. She fast-forwards through the images, not willing to rewatch them anymore. Sara is stonily silent but Moira gasps at the first glimpse. Felicity doesn't hit play fast enough, not that it matters. The two women around her instantly glean the worst of it from the simple fact that Oliver and Ellie are asleep on the couch. And then the tear through time comes on.

"Oh dear God," Moira breathes. Felicity understands the horror in her future mother-in-law's voice very well. And it's a testament to that shared feeling that Felicity barely reacts when the older woman's hand lands on her shoulder, squeezing tightly, like she needs an anchor. Oh yeah, Felicity gets that. Moira takes an unsteady breath as the video unfolds. "When was this?"

"It's from last week." You'd think seeing it over and over would desensitize her, but it's somehow worse. "This is only what I've found

so far, and it's… There aren't cameras in every room of the manor."

"Has he broken through?" Sara asks.

Felicity looks at the other woman with a start. That sends a chill down her spine, because she hadn't even considered it. The most recent glimmer was from two days ago, and everything after that shows nothing. Was he here already?

"I don't know," Felicity replies, her voice uneven. "I don't think so? I mean, if he was, he would've tried to take Ellie already. Right?"

Sara purses her lips, emphasizing the dimple in her chin. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Felicity repeats. Sara glances at her and Felicity's voice rises. "What do you mean *maybe*?"

Sara's response is cut off by a loud, long-toned beep from her computers. Felicity and Moira jump, but Sara is still as a map fills one of the computer screens, a portion of it highlighted in a jagged red octagon.

"What was that?" Oliver asks from behind them, followed by Ellie's soft addition, "That was really loud."

Felicity downsizes the Zoom playback, switching to the next screen as Oliver, John and Lyla join them. She points at the screen.

"This what's been narrowed down for where Isabel and Blood have been over the last few weeks," she says. "I'm kind of wondering if they're moving Thea around, because there's no central location, no one place that they stop consistently." She types in a few changes, restarting the search with new parameters, but after a few seconds, the red octagon merely shifts a few blocks - *outward*, making it bigger. Felicity looks back at Oliver. "This is as good as it's going to get for now."

"That's too much," Diggle says.

"Narrow it down to places that have space to hold people for long periods of time," Oliver suggests.

Felicity huffs in exasperation. "Oliver, that entire district is basically abandoned warehouses. And it's near the docks on one end, who's to say she's not using shipping containers or…" *Oh.* "Shipping containers!"

"What?"

"That gave me an idea," Felicity says as she grabs her chair. Moira and Sara have to step back to avoid being hit as she sits down. "The reason I couldn't really get Isabel nailed down is because it seemed like she was always moving. I thought it was because she was being smart, like evading me, like she knew we'd be looking, but… maybe she's been moving this entire time, on purpose."

"Isabel?" Oliver asks skeptically, not following.

"No, *Thea*," Felicity says, fingers flying over the keyboard.

"I think you're the only one on this logic train, Felicity," Digg adds.

"Different locations!" Felicity finishes the new algorithm with flourish. The computer instantly sends the data through, and the map instantly start reforming. "I had the inkling, but then… Anyway, that warehouse where that first power surge came from? Completely empty. There aren't even rats! Why move if you don't have to, especially since nobody was following the admittedly obvious trail? Because Isabel isn't stupid."

"I'm still not following," Oliver says.

"Different locations," Felicity repeats just as her computer beeps again. "There!" The same map is up but there are three different focal points within it now, encapsulating much smaller areas. "I was looking for one location, and the pattern couldn't form because I was looking for one." She looks at them. "What if she's using separate locations, to hold everything? Only an idiot would keep Thea, Roy and the biotransfuser in one spot. Especially Roy and that thing, since she used him for our mirakuru friend Junior. Isabel is a… not nice person, but she's not an idiot. Unfortunately."

Oliver stares at the screen. "So Thea's in one of those areas."

"Maybe. Probably," Felicity amends, already bringing up street cameras for the highlighted areas. There's nothing remarkable as she continues, "And Roy. Hopefully. These are the main places that Isabel stopped over the last two weeks. This one frequently in the last week." She looks back at him. "I'd say that's your best bet for a place to start."

"That's still a several-block radius," Diggle says. "We can cover more ground if we split up."

"I'm going alone," Oliver announces, although judging by how quietly he says it, he might as well have whispered the words.

"What?" Felicity demands, the same time that Diggle and Sara do. She stands up abruptly, her chair flying back, and the only reason it doesn't go careening halfway across the floor is because Sara's there to stop it. "You are not going alone. You are absolutely *not* going alone."

"And I'm not leaving you alone here," he replies with the same vehemence although his logic is so completely flawed that it momentarily stuns her. He takes advantage of it. "I can't even bring myself to put Ellie down right now, do you really think I'm going to be able to leave both of you, not knowing that you are *one-hundred* percent covered?"

"You do realize you are a very important link in this chain, right?" Felicity retorts. The rest of the group slowly steps away, not leaving, but giving them room. "What happens if he gets you, Oliver?"

She misses the way Ellie flinches, but she doesn't miss Oliver's reaction to it. He cradles her closer, his hand covering her head, his palm pressing to her ear. "Felicity…"

"And not to even touch on the fact that we have no idea if Thea's even in that area," Felicity continues, talking over him. "How much ground are you going to cover? You don't know how big those buildings are, you don't know if they're using multiple ones… you don't even know if Isabel happened to be doing really good PR in the Glades for the last week! So no, you are not going alone so you-know-who can slip through without you even knowing it and take you, that's not going to happen."

As silence rings through the lair, Diggle says, "Okay, we clearly missed something."

"Felicity," Oliver says, his voice strained. "I cannot - I *will* not - be able to concentrate not knowing that you are both safe." She opens her mouth to argue, but he cuts her off with a harsh. "*No*. It's not a discussion. I can barely think about letting Ellie go right now, right this second, much less out of my sight, out of my general vicinity…" He clenches his teeth. "Because he was *right there,* he was… and I didn't even know it."

"Guys..." Diggle starts, but neither of them respond. They only have eyes for each other.

"I can't look for my sister worrying that I might come back to find both of you gone." He shakes his head. "I can't do it… and I can't leave Thea out there because I can't leave you here, so please… *please*." Oliver stares at her. "I need them here."

Felicity can't argue against that, she *can't*. It's his sister out there and his family in danger here - he simply can't win, not in this situation. *Still.*

"At least take Sara." He closes his eyes, but she doesn't let him finish. "John and Lyla will be here the entire time. Right, guys?"

"I won't let them out of my sight, not for a second," Diggle says, echoing Lyla's, "Absolutely. And I can call in some friends. They're ARGUS, but I trust them. It's only a few, but it's a few more eyes to help look. They can take the other areas. We'll find her. And Roy."

Oliver gives her a short nod of thanks, but he isn't done. "Felicity…"

"The longer you stand there arguing with me, the longer you'll be away, so stop. Go suit up, get Thea and Roy, and come home."

Like it's that easy. But she has to say it that way, because she knows it won't be that easy, she knows that if they don't find them tonight or tomorrow, they'll be facing a world where bartering with Isabel is not only an option, but a likelihood… a world where their only problem isn't just Zoom anymore.

Oliver sighs before pressing a lingering kiss to Ellie's head. Ellie's eyes slip shut at the same time Oliver's do.

"Okay," he says softly. "Okay. Sara's with me." His eyes drill holes into Diggle's as he adds, "Don't let them out of your sight, not even for a second."

"Never," Diggle replies.

Oliver reaches for Felicity and she instinctively puts her hand in his. He brings it up to his lips, pressing a kiss to her fingers before pulling her closer, hugging her.

Felicity closes her eyes and whispers, "Hurry back to me."

"Always."

Chapter 27

Ultimately, the rest of the day and the morning that follows are nothing more than an exercise in frustration. Precious little goes according to plan. The only things that stay on track are that Slade's transport goes smoothly and Ellie's kept safe. But that's it. That's all.

As the search continues into the night, Digg suggests moving things back to the manor again. Oliver kills that idea immediately, not wanting his daughter anywhere *near* where Zoom had been trying to pierce through, but Diggle cuts him off, "*Everyone's dead on their feet, man. And the foundry isn't exactly the Four Seasons.*" It's only when the other man suggests a rotating sleep schedule to watch over Ellie and Felicity that Oliver is placated, especially when Digg described the cameras Felicity plans to set up, meant to capture every angle of their bedroom.

Oliver allows himself approximately forty seconds to let the fear and horror of what he'd seen on those monitors earlier consume him completely before he shuts it down and refocuses on the demands of the moment. They don't have time for him to lose it, *he* doesn't have time for that. His family is safe and guarded, and that's all that matters.

Well… Felicity and Ellie are, anyhow. The same can't be said for Thea or Roy.

Guilt and fear make a heady cocktail in the pit of his stomach.

Every warehouse, every shipping container, every abandoned building Oliver and Sara search turns up empty. There's signs of recent activity in some and Oliver damn near crumbles when he finds his sister's broken sunglasses on the floor of a dingy, rat-infested former office building near the wharf. They fall apart in his hand when he picks them up. She'd been there. She'd been *right there* and he'd missed it. He'll question for weeks - for months, maybe longer - how much he'd missed her by. Had she been there hours ago? Days? Was it a matter of minutes?

In spite of his previous insistence that he should do this alone, he finds himself grateful that Sara is nearby, keeping him on track, keeping him focused in the face of his frustration and grief. Oliver's capable of coping with a lot, but actually searching and finding *nothing* has fast become a strain that's nearly too much even for him.

They're all short on sleep by the time Sara and Oliver make it back to the mansion, but no one as much as Felicity. Oliver knows she's blaming herself. He can't save Thea and Roy if she can't find them. And if he can't save Thea and Roy, that means handing over Slade, something he'd told her he absolutely would not do because he'd been so certain she would find them… Except she still hasn't.

Oliver's pretty sure she doesn't sleep at all.

He tries, somewhere around three in the morning to get her away from her keyboard. Really, he should have known better. She barely even acknowledges him, only giving him a tiny shrug when he rubs her back, telling her to come to bed.

Despite his efforts to not wake their daughter, his quiet appeals rouse Ellie, who eventually whispers with a sleep-laden yawn, "You're being silly, Daddy. Momma's in the zone."

Where she'd gotten *that* phrase from, he has no idea, but she also isn't wrong. After Felicity's grumbles, "*I'm a little busy here, Oliver,*" without even looking in his direction, Oliver gives up.

Soaking in Ellie's judgemental little shake of her head - it's a little alarming, because it's something his mother would do - he makes his way to the bed. With the knowledge that Sara's on surveillance duty a few rooms down, monitoring the newly installed cameras, he wraps himself around his little girl, taking a moment to cuddle her close. His eyes never leave Felicity as he listens to Ellie talk herself back to sleep.

Oliver isn't sure when he falls asleep, but he somehow manages four whole hours, the image of Felicity hunched over at his desk staying with him the entire time.

When he wakes up, she's exactly where he'd left her, steadily typing away at the keys. Other than two more empty coffee cups on the desk, there's no sign at all that she's moved overnight. As much as he wants to find his sister and keep Slade out of Isabel's hands, the sight breaks his heart a bit.

Propping himself up, he eases his arm out from under Ellie as he says in a gravelly whisper, "Felicity, honey…"

"Not now." She doesn't even look back at him. She's so honed in on the computer screen, he's surprised she heard him at all.

"Momma monster," Ellie sighs in a barely audible whisper. She rolls over onto her belly, peeking open one eye to look at them both.

She's very perceptive, their daughter.

Oliver stares at Felicity, waiting for her to acknowledge Ellie, but it's like they aren't even there. She's tense, her hands in constant motion. He can see, even from where he is, that she's stiff, her rigid muscles making her movements more jerky than they should be, telling him she hasn't taken a break in *hours*.

That breaks his heart a little more.

Glancing at the rising sun, he checks the clock to confirm the time, noting that Digg's the one keeping guard now. He looks into one of the cameras in their room, nodding his head to Ellie in a silent request. He knows it's more than enough to have Diggle at their door in a moment.

He'd be surprised if Digg hadn't already been by once or twice, trying to get Felicity to take a nap, if nothing else. Hell, he's probably the one who brought her coffee. She's not exactly in the frame of mind to get up and leave the room. She doesn't react even when Ellie shifts, pressing her feet into Oliver's hip. Her sharp little bones make him murmur, "Watch those things, Ellie-bug," but Felicity doesn't move. Oh yes, he needs his friend right now, because he needs to have a conversation with Felicity and it's probably something their daughter shouldn't be there for.

Sure enough, a minute or two later, a soft knock raps on the door. Oliver scoops a bleary-eyed Ellie up into his arms before going to greet Diggle.

"Hi, Uncle Digg," Ellie offers with a wide yawn that makes her words nearly unintelligible.

An amused, light smile pulls at Diggle's lips. "Hey yourself."

"This been all night?" Oliver asks, tilting his head back towards Felicity. She remains oblivious to the world around her.

Diggle's eyes switch over to Felicity. He simply nods in reply, and while Oliver's stomach sinks at the confirmation, his brow furrowing in clear concern, Digg's face grows heavy with understanding. Yes, they need to find Thea and Roy. They have to save them. But at the rate she's going, Felicity's going to collapse. She's only human and

she's pushed herself way beyond normal limits. It's sucked her in, pulling her down, and while he gets it, he *does*, they also need her rested and alert for whatever comes next.

Because it's increasingly clear that they're going to have to meet Isabel's terms. They're going to have to give her Slade. And that notion is dangerous enough without handicapping themselves through exhaustion. It's ironic, his thinking this, considering all the times in the past she's had to convince him of the same thing.

"Uncle Digg," Ellie says, far more awake now. "I have a really important question." Her voice is hushed and serious. She glances back to where her mother is preoccupied with the intricacies of cyberspace, biting her lip.

"What's that?" Diggle asks.

She chances a glance at her father before asking, "Do you know where the Lucky Charms are?"

Oliver can't help his grin at that. It's astounding that even now - even with his sister held captive and his girlfriend more than half manic, even when they're about to release *Slade Wilson* of all people - that Ellie can make him smile, that she can make any of them smile. Her power over them is quiet but absolute and she's changed each of them for the better since she fell into their lives.

"Lucky Charms?" Diggle repeats with blatant amusement.

Ellie nods with that wide-eyed stare that they all recognize very well at this point, the one that so frequently gets her whatever it is she wants. Oliver's a total sucker for it and he's pretty sure Diggle is, too.

"Momma always has some, but she *hides* them, 'cause she says too much sugar isn't good for growing girls. But *she* likes them," Ellie informs him. "And so do I." She leans closer to Diggle, as if she's sharing a secret. "I don't need to grow so much right now."

Diggle chuckles, raising an eyebrow at her. "And you think I'm crazy enough to go against your mom and give you her marshmallow-filled breakfast cereal?"

Ellie's face is all seriousness. "I'll share with you."

She's *negotiating*, Oliver realizes with a start. His three-year-old is treating this like a business deal. His mother will be so incredibly

proud.

"Are you bribing me with stolen goods?" Digg asks.

"It's *sharing*," Ellie clarifies. "Stealing's naughty."

"Oh, of course," Diggle says, glancing at Oliver, his lips ticking up even more. Oliver just shrugs, watching the entire exchange with a quiet smile of his own.

"You can have the horseshoes even," Ellie continues. "'Cause I know they're your favorite."

That has the most sheepish look Oliver's ever seen skirting across Diggle's face. He honestly can't even believe his eyes for a moment. If he didn't know better, he'd think Digg was blushing.

"That's not… I don't have a favorite marshmallow."

"Lying's naughty, too," Ellie scolds, shaking a finger at him. "An' I know it's your favorite because we always share and you always take my horseshoes since they're lucky."

Oliver barely contains his snort of amusement. Yeah, there's zero percent chance he isn't going to tease the *hell* out of his friend about this. But later, because Felicity's soft voice interrupts the moment. She mutters something at her computer, something that his daughter does *not* need to be hearing. It's a stark reminder of everything they're going to face today.

"Alright, you got me," Digg confesses, bringing the attention back to him. He holds his arms out for Ellie, who pecks her father on the cheek before flat-out leaping at him. "I don't know if your mom's got any here, but we can look, okay?"

"Okay," Ellie agrees with a definitive nod.

Diggle tilts his head at Oliver - it says everything he isn't willing to vocalize in front of Ellie: "*Take care of Felicity. I've got the little one*" - before heading down the hall. And he does have her, Oliver knows that through and through. Ellie's a little ball of joy, her squeals of excitement over the possibility of an overly-sweet breakfast echoing back to Oliver. She's completely oblivious to the undercurrent of the hand-off.

"No!" Felicity snaps. Oliver jumps, spinning in time to see her

punching at the keys almost viciously. "No, no*, no*! That doesn't even make *sense*!"

Closing the door softly, Oliver crosses the room. She doesn't acknowledge him; she's shaking her head, grinding her teeth together, her aggravation only emphasizing the deep circles under her eyes.

"Hey," he says quietly, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She shrugs it off immediately, biting out, "I need a minute."

"It's been a lot more than a minute, Felicity," Oliver replies.

She merely huffs. Her annoyance permeates the air. He tells himself not to take it personally, because he'd been expecting it, but it's easier said than done, especially when she goes on to completely ignore his presence.

"*Felicity*."

He grips her shoulder, pulling her slightly to turn her, and that's enough to have her whirling on him.

"God*damn* it, Oliver, I'm busy!" she snaps, finally looking up at him. "Would you just let me *work*?"

He's not fazed, but he can't help the way his eyebrows shoot up at the sharpness in her tone. Her words seem to instantly register in her head, and she suddenly jerks, like she hadn't even been aware of what she was doing. Then, her body deflates.

"I didn't mean to…" she starts. Oliver offers her a sad smile, because he knows. Felicity shakes her head. "You didn't deserve that."

His fingers skirt along the edge of her shirt, seeking out the smooth heat of her skin as he says, "You don't deserve what you're doing to yourself right now either." Oliver pushes his fingers inside the collar of her blouse at the base of her neck. She's tense, her muscles rock hard and knotted from spending the entire night hunched over the computer. "Come on, take a break."

"I have to find them, Oliver," she says, still shaking her head, as if there's no other alternative.

Oliver sighs, his voice low as he says, "I think we're past that now."

God, is *that* a hard pill to swallow, but it's true. It's true and he knows

it. Cisco should be here soon, if he's not already, with the cure in hand. Slade's in place. Even if they found Thea and Roy right this minute, Oliver's not sure they could avoid handing Slade over in exchange for them. If they aren't together - and it's become increasingly clear over the last day that they probably aren't - then that means simultaneous attacks, splitting up their already thinned out resources to save Roy, save Thea, stop Isabel, keep Slade in custody, destroy the biotransfuser, keep Ellie and Felicity safe…

They're one hell of a team, but they still have a limited number of people *on* it.

"No," Felicity says, the word stringent. "No, don't be ridiculous. This is what I do. I've got this. I'll find them. Just get some sleep and I'll figure it out by morning."

"Honey…" he says, fully aware of how pained his voice sounds. "It is morning."

"What?" She blinks. "That's not…" She glances at the clock, her confusion mounting, before her gaze darts to the bed. The empty sheets staring back at her make her breath hitch dangerously and she stands abruptly. "*Ellie*. Where's-"

"She's with Digg," Oliver says, cutting her off. Her eyes fly to him and he takes advantage of her distraction, pulling her away from the desk slightly. He cups the sides of her neck, his thumbs bracing against her jaw. "She's fine. She slept right here all night."

None of that processes easily in Felicity's mind. He watches the wheels turning as her brow furrows, her eyes darting back to the bed, taking in the changes in her surroundings. He can tell it hits her hard that she didn't even *notice* Ellie was gone. Her face crumples as she looks back at him, raising a hand to cover her mouth.

"It's morning?" she asks from behind her fingers.

"Yeah," he agrees.

"I failed?" *Oh*, he hates the broken quality in her voice. "I didn't find them… I didn't *find them*. That's what I do, Oliver. It's why I'm here, it's why I'm part of the team."

He'd been prepared for anger from her, for frustration and sadness, but he surely hadn't been ready for this.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asks.

"This is how I contribute, Oliver," she insists. "It's what makes me useful, why I matter. I don't shoot people or hit people or, do *anything* really to people. I do computers. I'm your tech girl. I'm-"

"Out of your mind and in desperate need of sleep," Oliver interrupts. He narrows his eyes, not letting her look away. "You can't possibly believe that's all you are to us. To me. You have to know better than that. Tell me you do."

She squirms a little under his piercing stare, but he isn't about to let this drop. And, even though he can tell she can't quite keep his gaze - which is an answer in and of itself - she does keep meeting it.

"To you," she agrees after a moment. "I know I'm more than that to *you*… now. Maybe not before all of this, before Ellie. But to the team… Oliver, this is how I fit in. This is the part I play. I don't beat people up like Sara or shoot people like John or-"

"I don't want you to be Sara," he interrupts again, his voice rising slightly because being exceedingly clear on this point is paramount. "Or John. I want you to be *you* and you're allowed to fail sometimes, Felicity. You aren't perfect. None of us are. Do you think Sara's never lost a fight? Digg's never missed a shot?"

"But this is Thea!" she cries, her voice cracking. It takes everything Oliver has not to wince at that. Because she's right. If ever there was a bad time for Felicity not to be able to save the day, this is it. "This is your sister, my daughter's aunt, and I should have found her!"

"You are not perfect," he repeats, driving the point home with his unflinching gaze. "I don't blame you, Felicity, and neither will Thea. We'll get her back. We have a backup plan-"

"A plan that lets a madman loose who wants my daughter dead!" Felicity retorts. "I didn't just fail you and Thea, Oliver. I failed Ellie too and I just… I just… *Damn it*!" She grips his shirt with both hands, knuckles clenched white as her nails dig into her own palms through the fabric. "Oh my god, I *failed* her."

"Felicity…" he whispers, sliding his hands up to cup her cheeks. "No."

"I failed our daughter, Oliver." Tears fill her eyes, her breathing becoming uneven as the words spill out of her. "This is what I do and I failed her."

"No," he insists, "you didn't."

Oliver tugs her to him, wrapping his arms around her as she lets out a desperate little sob against his chest. Half of this is exhaustion, he's sure of that, but it's also only half of it. The rest… the rest is something she honestly believes and he *hates* that, because he knows that's not true.

"You didn't fail her, Felicity," he says, smoothing his hands over her hair and back. She holds onto him tighter, trembling. He cups the back of her head, cradling her close. "Ellie's safe and loved and we're going to keep it that way. I swear to you - *I swear* - that Slade will never lay a hand on her again. Not ever." Oliver presses his face to the top of her head, whispering, "None of us is perfect, that's why we're a team. We need each other."

After a long painful minute, she gives him a choked sigh before letting go, all of her weight leaning into his frame. He holds her up, taking every inch of it. She's nothing more than stress and exhaustion at this point and he's not surprised in the least when her shoulders shake with her muffled sobs, her tears hot where they soak his shirt. She is, in so many ways, the strongest woman he's ever met. But she has her limits. They all do. And she's been pushed well past hers.

Oliver kisses the top of her head, moving his hands so he's cradling her face again. He pulls her back just enough so he can kiss her forehead before whispering, "Come on." He leads her to the bed, easing her down onto the mattress.

"I'm sorry," she tells him, looking up with wet, red-rimmed eyes. "I'm so sorry, Oliver."

His heart shatters at the sight. He wants so very badly to take that look off her face.

"Shh." Oliver sits down next to her. "You don't have to be." He tugs her against him again, laying back with her in his arms. She goes willingly, curling into him. "It's okay. Just rest for a bit, alright?"

Felicity pushes herself closer, nuzzling her face into his neck, exhaustion making her sluggish. "I'm so tired."

"Go to sleep," he urges, rubbing his hand up and down her back. When he reaches the hem of her shirt, he slips his fingers underneath it, pressing comforting circles against her skin. She shivers, melting against him. Her glasses press painfully into his collarbone. Oliver

pulls them off, folding them before kissing her forehead again. "I'm right here, okay? Just close your eyes for a bit."

The second she closes her eyes, she succumbs. Her breathing evens out as she relaxes into his embrace, her limbs growing heavy. Oliver isn't sure how much time passes. He doesn't sleep. He can't. Digg's got Ellie downstairs and, as far as he knows, there's no one monitoring the cameras to keep them safe if Zoom should decide to try and break through again. But that's not important because *she* sleeps.

He's wrapped up in her, honed entirely on the woman slumbering in his arms, and there's nowhere else he'd rather be. He knows living in this moment with her instead of focusing on the problems of the day is a luxury he can't afford for long. Still, he savors it right up until a soft knock on their door pulls him away from her.

A small part of him wants to ignore it, wants to stay right here with her, making sure she gets the rest she so desperately needs, but he knows that can't happen. The knock comes again. Closing his eyes for a brief second, relishing the feel of her warmth, Oliver finally moves.

Felicity lets out a little snuffling noise against his chest as he eases himself away from her, gently prying her fingers from where they still clutch at his shirt. Even in sleep she's clearly displeased with his distance, but there's no helping it. Not right now.

Slipping off the bed, he pauses long enough to readjust her slightly, just enough to pull the comforter over her before setting her glasses on the nightstand. And then he pads over to the door as quietly as he can. He pulls it open, the creaking handle of the doorknob the only evidence of his movement, to find Sara on the other side.

"Hey," he greets in a hushed tone, glancing back toward Felicity to find her still fast asleep. He steps out into the hallway, leaving the door open behind him.

Sara's eyes dart into the room. "She find anything new?"

Oliver shakes his head, a solemn move that has Sara's lips thinning and brow tightening in response. Her eyes remain on Felicity, and Oliver follows her gaze. Even though she's finally sleeping, her wariness is still draped around her like a blanket.

"That can't have gone over well with her," Sara ventures. "I'm surprised she's not still at it."

"She would be if I hadn't stopped her." Oliver sighs, scrubbing his face before pressing his fingers into his eyes. He presses hard enough that he sees stars. "I need Thea safe. I do. But…" He looks back into the bedroom. "I need Felicity in one piece, too."

"I know you do, Ollie," Sara replies. "I'm glad she's resting." She rests her hand on his shoulder in solidarity for a moment. "We'll get Thea."

"Yeah," Oliver confirms, wishing he felt as certain as he'd tried to convey to Felicity. It was easier in the face of her self-blame, because he *knew* that she was wrong to place it all on her shoulders. With a heavy sigh, he looks back at Sara. "How are things looking?"

"ARGUS has Slade in town. They're keeping him sedated and locked up in some safehouse. Lyla won't say where, but things have gone smoothly with him so far."

"And what about the cure?"

"Cisco's here," Sara advises. "Besides not shutting up about you being the Arrow, he seems pretty confident in his work. But he also keeps reminding us all that he hasn't exactly had the chance to test it on anyone yet."

"We've got Slade," Oliver says. "We've got the attempt at a cure. I say we put the two together and see what happens."

"It's going to take at least a day to kick in," Sara tells him. "I agree that we need to inject him as soon as possible, but I don't like the gap in our timeline since you're meeting Isabel in all of four hours and the trade off is going down tonight."

Oliver's face darkens. "Me either."

Fourteen hours, give or take, is a long time for things to go wrong. Even if Cisco's right and the cure works perfectly, that still gives a very angry mirakuru-fueled Slade plenty of time to exact any sort of revenge he's no doubt been dreaming up for weeks, months… *years* even.

"We're going to have to go to ground after the trade off," he resolves. "At least until we know it works."

Sara can only blink at him in shock. He can't blame her. Running and hiding is not his usual approach. But he's rarely had so many people who mean so much to him to protect.

He's never had this much to lose.

"It's bad timing," she advises, sounding less judgemental of his plan than he'd expected. "With the election tomorrow, your mom's absence will be very noticeable."

"I know," he agrees. "But I don't think we can avoid it. I need to get Thea, Felicity, Ellie, my mom… even Donna… I need to get them somewhere Slade can't find them. And I'm not leaving them while Zoom is a threat."

Sara nods. "Then we won't." Like it's nothing. Like she isn't continuing to offer to drop everything to protect her ex-boyfriend's family for who knows how long.

"Does Slade know where the ARGUS safehouse is?" Oliver asks.

"No, Lyla said he's completely knocked out," Sara tells him. "She's guarding the location like it's the Hope Diamond. She's not letting anyone know where it is."

"Good. We'll get Thea and hopefully Roy, slip past Isabel and hide out there for a day or so."

"Are we vetoing exploding Slade's head?" Sara asks. "Because, I've got to say, that's a solution I like."

"No," Oliver replies. "But I want to wait until the mirakuru is out of his system, if we can. We have a better chance of killing him."

Sara gives him a sardonic look. "I'm pretty sure an exploding head is something even mirakuru can't heal."

"I honestly have no idea what it would do," Oliver says. "And I'm not playing around when it comes to Slade Wilson. I want his threat eliminated."

"Fair enough." Sara nods. "What about Isabel? And Blood?"

"The polls look good for Mom right now," Oliver tells her. "I think she's going to win regardless of what Blood does at this point and the company's ours. It's only a matter of time until Isabel is forced out."

"That's not exactly justice, Ollie," Sara points out, folding her arms and raising an eyebrow at him. "They've screwed with a lot of people's lives. They need to be held accountable for that."

"Yeah," Oliver agrees. "But they're both too high profile to put an arrow through without it coming back on us and they can't just disappear into ARGUS without questions being asked, even if Waller would take them, which I seriously doubt. She doesn't have much usefulness for a failed politician and a vindictive former intern."

"Well… what if we used their visibility against them?"

"What do you mean?" Oliver asks, not following where her mind has gone.

"Something Laurel said months ago that Dad told me about," she says. "She suspected Blood before any of us, but we didn't take her very seriously since she was kind of a mess."

That's an understatement.

"But she was right anyhow," he adds. "How'd she know?"

"I'm not sure," Sara replies. "But I'll find out. Maybe with a bit more digging…"

"We can hold them accountable in a more legitimate way," Oliver finishes.

"It's worth a shot, anyhow."

"It is," he agrees. "But I don't like our timeframe. Whatever they're planning, it's gonna happen soon. There's a reason she wanted Slade back before the election."

"A general for her troops, right?" Sara reminds him. "That spells dangerous things for the city. You sure The Arrow's gonna be able to spend the better part of a day in hiding if she sets an army of mirakuru-crazed people on the city?"

No, he's not sure. It goes against his mission in a very fundamental way. It violates all of the goals he set for himself, the cause his father left him. And yet, the decision is easy. There's Ellie to consider, and Felicity. Every inch of his being tells him that they're more important, that protecting them is so much more vital than saving strangers. It's selfish in a way he's never felt before, but if it came down to saving the city or saving his family? He's fairly certain he knows how that story would end.

It's a truth that settles something deep inside him. There's absolutely

nothing he won't do for them, to make sure they're okay. The depth of that feeling is a little frightening, but at the same time, it's *right*.

He clenches his jaw, feeling an even deeper kinship with his mother than he thought possible. Hadn't it just been yesterday that she'd challenged him and he'd shut her down? Because there *were* lines, lines nobody should cross… but she'd seen right through him, because she was intimately familiar with the feeling of doing everything in your power when your family's threatened.

"Then we'd better hurry with trying to pin something on Isabel and Blood," Oliver finally answers, barely able to meet Sara's eyes as he speaks.

For a moment, he thinks she's about to say something, call him out on his priorities, but then her face softens and whatever it is that she's thinking slides away. She nods instead, watching him with something that looks strangely like a combination of respect and envy. He finds it hard to watch - it leaves him feeling far too exposed - so he turns and soaks in the sight of Felicity instead. She sighs in her sleep, rolls over and reaches for the space he'd just been in. His heart flutters at the sight of her reaching for him, even in her sleep.

"I really am happy for you guys, Ollie," Sara says. Before he can respond, she changes the subject. "I'll call Laurel, talk to Lyla, see what we can find. When your girl's had a few hours of sleep, we could probably use some help from her tracking down more info."

"She needs sleep first," he replies decisively.

"Chill, Ollie." Sara laughs quietly, shaking her head and he barely keeps himself from giving her a glare. He loves Sara. He does. But moments where she seems entertained by his attachment to Felicity irk him and he'd rather not dwell on that. "I'm not gonna wake her. Just, whenever she's up. Okay?"

He manages a short nod. "Who's on the cameras right now?"

"Lyla," Sara says. "She took over from me after she got a few hours of sleep. Diggle's got Ellie in the kitchen. Your mom and Donna are downstairs, too."

"You mind heading back to Lyla?" he asks. "I'll meet you both there in ten minutes. We should go over the plan for today."

"You got it." With another quick pat on his shoulder, Sara nods before

turning on her heel and heading back down the hall without another word.

Oliver steps back into the room, dragging his hand through his hair. His eyes never leave Felicity's prone figure as he takes a deep breath, steeling himself for the day ahead. There's so much on their plate, so many moving parts and things that can go wrong, and time is of the essence for all of it… and yet, all he wants to do is join her. He wants to stay right here and make sure she doesn't move, that she gets the sleep she needs. He hates the thought of her waking up to an empty room, to her feelings of failure and doubt, all of it driving her right back to her computer.

It shouldn't be a luxury, being able to stay here while his love sleeps, but it is.

So instead, he heads back through the bedroom to the bathroom to brush his teeth and pull on some fresh clothes. It only takes a moment. And when he heads back out into the bedroom, he's once again struck by how badly he'd like to just crawl back into bed with her, sink into her embrace and waste the morning away.

But that's the sort of morning he's fighting for right now, the kind of life he has to earn. He can see it. He can *taste* it. It's right in front of him, clearer than it's ever been, more possible than it's ever seemed and he wants it all the more for how real it seems.

He doesn't want to wake her - she needs the sleep so desperately - but he also can't leave the room without saying goodbye.

Oliver crosses the room to her side and sits next to her still-slumbering form. The mattress creaks under his weight and she burrows further under the blanket, curling toward him, her hand sliding over to rest on his thigh.

He's overly aware of the fact that Sara and Lyla are probably watching, but he doesn't let that stop him from stroking her frizzy hair away from Felicity's forehead. She hums, chasing his fingers when he moves them. With a small smile, Oliver leans over to press a lingering kiss to her brow.

"I love you," he whispers against her skin. He should be getting up, leaving her to sleep, but he lingers. It's amazing how everything had felt so perfectly *normal* just a few days ago. The pressures had been outside their bubble, easy to put out of their minds, but now they're back, with a vengeance they can't ignore. He kisses her again. "We'll

be okay. I promise."

As he pulls back, she huffs out a little breath. Oliver's hand trails across her cheek, tracing her jaw before slipping down to her neck. She's so soft under his calloused fingers, so unguarded and readily vulnerable to his touch. He can't believe she's his, that this is his life now. There's so much trust that's built between them so very quickly. She knows what he's capable of and yet she still curls toward him in sleep, reaches for him openly. Because the truth of it is, she's seen the worst of him, but she's also seen the best, the parts he hadn't been sure were still there. Parts he'd never known were there in the first place. Maybe they hadn't been, before her.

Maybe he's better *because* of her.

Oliver watches her sleep, everything he's feeling solidifying in the core of his being.

He's stopped questioning what he'd do and knows for absolute certain that he will choose his family over the city if that's what it comes down to. Not because of Ellie, though there's that, too. And not for Thea or his mother, as much as he loves them both. For *her*, for Felicity. It should be scary that she's become so important to him, but it's not.

When it comes down to it, if his choice is between anything versus Felicity, there's simply no choice to be made.

Maybe there never has been.

"I love you," he repeats, his hand sliding back up through her hair to cup the back of her head.

She turns, moving into his touch, nuzzling her cheek into his palm.

"Ol'ver," she whispers. She's still more asleep than not and he wants it to stay that way for her sake.

"Go back to sleep," he murmurs. He can't help himself, leaning back over to kiss her forehead again. But she tilts her head instead, meeting his lips in a lazy, imprecise kiss. She's unfettered, this sleepy Felicity, and he smiles, cupping her face to keep her still, to give her a proper kiss.

"Come back to bed?" she sighs against his lips. Her hand slips up to his shoulder, giving him a half-hearted tug. "Need m' pillow."

"I can't," he tells her regretfully. He slides his hand up her arm until their fingers tangle together. He kisses each one of hers. "I have to go talk to the others and get Ellie ready for the day."

"'Kay," she breathes, her eyes still shut. She shifts, not letting him go in the least as she smiles in her sleep. "Love you. Leave Nate with me."

Oliver inhales sharply, his heart leaping into his throat. She's so asleep, utterly gone to the world, and she's dreaming of their family. He closes his eyes, breathing in her scent as he presses his lips to her wrist. There's so much emotion welling up in him that he might choke on it.

It redoubles his resolve to fix this mess they're in, to give her the life she's dreaming of, the life she deserves.

With one more lingering kiss to her wrist, he lets go and stands up. He forces himself to focus on the now that gets them to the life they clearly both want. By the time he's out of the room, she's snoring softly. It fades away when the door snicks shut.

In years past, this house would have been near silent in the mornings. Not anymore, though. He can hear Ellie giggling from the kitchen and the low tenor of Digg's laugh along with her. His mother and Donna talk in animated tones in the front parlor.

It sounds like a home and it's the best sound he's heard in his entire life.

He doesn't head downstairs to join them, not yet.

Oliver makes his way down the hall several doors to where they've set up the surveillance system. Unsurprisingly, Sara and Lyla are both in the room, Lyla behind the monitors, watching over everyone simultaneously - Felicity, Ellie and Digg, Moira and Donna. Sara's nearby, typing something out on her phone with a frown playing across her lips. The presence he doesn't expect in the room, however, is a man who looks like an overgrown college kid that he assumes is Cisco Ramon. The mechanical engineer sits perched on the edge of the bed, tinkering with some kind of technology that Oliver can't possibly even take a guess at.

"Hey," Oliver says.

The young man's head shoots up as Lyla offers him a, "Good morning." But it's quickly drowned out as Cisco stands, nearly dropping the tech

in his hands.

"Holy crap, I cannot believe that Oliver Queen is actually The Arrow." Oliver pauses, but Cisco doesn't give him a chance to respond. "I can't believe that I'm actually meeting you, that I'm actually *helping* The Arrow. This is my life right now."

"See?" Sara asks.

"And Felicity's been working with you the entire time? Do you know Barry then? Obviously you know Barry, since he's this Flash that travels through time. Holy crap, *this is my life right now*. I can't believe Felicity never told us."

"It wasn't her secret to tell," Oliver tells him. He steps closer, narrowing his eyes. He's lowering his voice without even realizing it as he says, "And I appreciate your discretion. My identity is something nobody else needs to know."

"Oh yeah," Cisco says with a grin that nearly breaks his face. "That's The Arrow I know." Oliver frowns and Cisco immediately sobers. But only slightly. "Discretion. I'm your guy. But I totally knew, too. Well, it was more of an inkling, but Caitlin now owes me fifty bucks, so thanks for that. Oh, and congrats on the kid. Too bad it came with a little side of crazy. It's awesome levels of crazy, but still… Bummer."

Oliver stares at him for a beat before offering a dry, "Thanks."

Cisco waits, as if Oliver's going to give him more, but when nothing else comes, he just nods. "Okay then. Uh, do you guys have any Red Bull, by chance?" He glances at Sara, who's taken to staring at him with a little smile. He waves the equipment in his hand. "I think I've almost got this, but I'm running on like sugar, caffeine, and a sense of discovery right now, and my fuel levels are dangerously low."

"Coffee?" Sara offers.

"Yeah, no." Cisco wrinkles his face in distaste. "Code Red, maybe? Mountain Dew?"

Sara shakes her head with a look of never-ending amusement as she stands, heading over to the minibar. "You're going to rot your teeth out." She grabs him a Coke, which is the only thing remotely near what he's asking for in the house.

"Ah, sweet nectar of life," Cisco sighs. Cracking open the can, he takes

a deep swig before setting it down and rubbing his hands together. "*Okay*, so here's the sitch-"

"Sitch?" Oliver asks, looking to Sara and Lyla. "What the hell is a sitch?"

"*Sit*-uation," Cisco says like it's obvious. "Come on, dude, keep up. Didn't you ever watch Buffy?"

"No," Oliver replies.

"How did you never watch Buffy?" Cisco asks, almost affronted. Oliver huffs in quiet aggravation as Sara adds, "Your loss."

"Can we move on, please?" Oliver asks.

"Fine. *Anyway*," Cisco continues. "One, I think our cure is promising and Lyla's got her men-in-black bringing it to inject your big bad right now. And two, your house is *super* interesting."

Oliver frowns. "What does that mean?"

"It means you've got tachyon levels off the *charts,* man!"

That explains absolutely nothing. He looks to Sara, who just shakes her head, and Lyla, whose gaze remains fixed on the monitors, before turning back to Cisco with a questioning gaze.

"Oh right, that's… Okay, so tachyons," Cisco says, using his hands for emphasis as he explains. "They're particles that travel faster than the speed of light but they're also like *crazy* because when they lose energy, they gain speed. They're a paradox of the nobel prize sort. So they're *here* because they're a remnant of spent energy on faster-than-light speed!"

"Okay…?" Oliver says warily.

"Time travel!" Cisco exclaims. "That's what we're talking about with faster-than-light speed, right? So they're like… think of them as exhaust from a car. They're the bi-product of this Zoom dude popping through time to play boogeyman. And, man, it's like a cosmic ray shower all over this house! It's the *bomb*! Not… the actual bomb, though. I mean, it's not gonna explode your house or anything. No worries there."

"You can see evidence of where Zoom was?" Oliver asks.

"Better!" Cisco tells him, lifting up whatever it was he'd been working. "I can see evidence of where he'll be."

"What?" Oliver breathes out. For a second he's sure he didn't hear the other man correctly because that can't be possible. It *can't.* But then neither can time travel.

"It's *time*, man!" Cisco tells him animatedly. "And we're talking about particles that go faster than light, so it's not like they stop when Zoom pops through to say hello. They keep going! So wherever he's going to be - *whenever* he's going to be - the tachyons have already been there and keep going back in time."

"Can you block him?" Oliver asks, getting straight to the most important part of Cisco's explanation. "Can you… cut off these tachyons? Can you keep Zoom out of our time?"

"Tachyons are the exhaust, not the fuel," Cisco tells him like it's obvious, like Oliver cares about the science lesson in all of this, which he doesn't. All he cares about is how this affects his family. Cisco isn't done. "That's the speed force. The other side of the equation, right? Energy's gotta go somewhere."

"Okay, fine, so can you keep the speed force out, then?" Oliver asks, trying to keep his tone level and unannoyed, but *wow*, is that hard at the moment because it feels like answers are *right there* for the first time since Ellie showed up, but he just can't grasp them. And this kid is doing nothing to make it easier.

"That's the exciting part!" Cisco replies. "Or, well, *part* of the exciting part - there's a lot of exciting parts - I'm actually pretty sure we already did."

"What do you mean?" Oliver demands. "We didn't do anything like that."

"Well, not *now*." Cisco scoffs, shoving his hand into his pocket. A wrapper crinkles as he pulled out a Red Vine. He takes a healthy bite, munching on it between words. "But in the future we did."

Oliver's head is spinning as he tries to make sense of what he's hearing. He tries to slow it down, to force his mind to wrap around it, because this is *important*.

It means…

"So when the kidlet showed up there wasn't a barrier, right?" Cisco asks.

Oliver thinks back to that first moment when Ellie showed up in the lair. They hadn't been expecting her, obviously, and they hadn't known what to look for. But he's seen that rip in the timeline so many times at this point that he can picture the film-like barrier, the glowing hue of the world splitting open, with blinding clarity. And he doesn't remember seeing it all those weeks ago.

"No," Sara chimes in. She walks over, suddenly paying a whole lot more attention to Cisco. Or, rather, taking him more seriously. "There wasn't."

"Because we didn't stop it! Or, actually, we *won't* stop it. We didn't want to. Or… we won't want to." Cisco pauses. "Tenses are hard."

"You're telling me that we're the ones preventing him from breaking through?" Oliver asks. "How? When? Do we do it every time? How can we be sure?"

The questions are coming to his mind faster than he can even consider what they mean. All he can think is that he might finally, *finally* have a way to keep Ellie safe. To keep her *here*.

"Cause this is us!" Cisco announces, arms thrown wide like he expects that to make sense. "Okay, look, my fingerprints are all over this thing. So are Felicity's because there's no way I'm working the programing elements of this on my own and there ain't nobody on this planet with skills like your girl. But these equations to set this up? Oh man, what it does to the principle of special relativity is actual poetry. This is epic. Maiorino and Rodrigues would be, like, stupid jealous, you know? Actually… maybe they could help. I wonder if they'd take my call..."

"Cisco," Oliver interrupts. "I'm not a scientist. Or a poet. And I'm gonna need you to make a whole lot more sense." He pauses, fighting to keep his voice even as he adds, "Immediately."

"Right," Cisco says, holding up a finger. "Right. Sorry, I'm used to geeks. So all of time travel comes down to an equation. You know what that is, right?"

"Of course I know what an equation is," Oliver says, exasperation making it snappier than he'd intended.

"Sorry, didn't want to assume. I don't usually talk with people who don't speak nerd," Cisco says. "It's all about balance. You know much about cars?"

"Yes," Oliver replies.

"Tachyons are the exhaust, right?" Cisco asks. "So what happens when you plug the exhaust on a car? Not just a little, but completely?"

"The catalytic converter has too much backpressure and it kills the engine." The reality of what Cisco's saying washes over him. "Are you telling me we can stall Zoom out? Kill his timetravel abilities?"

"In *our* time, yes," Cisco replies. "We can unbalance the equation so he can't break through. I don't know how yet, but we have. Well, we *do* because that's what's happening. Somehow, someday, we manage to throw off the equation and keep him in a state of flux so he can't break through. Not without somehow rebalancing everything first."

"If that's true, why wasn't she safe in her time?" Lyla asks, glancing back. "Why was Zoom able to get through then?"

That stumps Cisco for a moment. He frowns, munching on his licorice, staring off into the distance as he mulls that over. They're all waiting, hanging on whatever he's going to say next. Oliver's pretty sure he's not even breathing at this point.

"Well, something causes the imbalance, right?" Cisco finally asks. "It must be broken at some point in the future, so you sent her back to a time you knew she could be protected."

"Barry said the speed force was messed with," Oliver says, remembering that day like it was yesterday, "that he couldn't control when he was going."

"So the equation was out of whack," Cisco nods, because this apparently makes sense to him. He suddenly grins. "This is so dope."

"Does that mean Ellie's stuck now?" Sara asks. Oliver's heart stops as she voices the question he'd been avoiding. "Is she staying here?"

"Probably not," Cisco tells them.

Oliver can't decide how he feels at that answer. On one hand, he wants to keep Ellie forever. On the other, he knows this isn't her time and he can't imagine losing her sometime in the future and never

getting her back. It's too horrible a notion to even contemplate.

"If we control the mechanics that limit time travel," Cisco says, "I've gotta figure we'd let ourselves back in."

"How far away are you from creating this thing?" Oliver asks.

"Like, decades." Cisco laughs. "This is way beyond modern science. I'm amazed to even see it."

"That doesn't make sense," Sara counters. "Ellie's only from about… what, seven or eight years in the future?"

"Oh, this is definitely from after her time," Cisco advises. "No way will we have this sorted out by then. Whenever we're controlling this barrier from, it's further down the road than that."

"She said you travelled through time," Oliver says, looking at Sara. "It could be you. Somehow."

"Maybe," Sara allows. "I mean, I guess that's possible… as possible as any of this. But I feel like we're missing something."

"We're missing a lot of things," Lyla announces. She stands up, her eyes never leaving the monitors - never leaving Felicity, where she sleeps, and the others where they've all gathered in the kitchen. She stretches before pulling out her cell phone. She glances at them. "But for now, we at least have a little bit more security. We might not be able to control faster-than-light travel, but we can track it before it even happens."

"And it's all hooked up," Cisco says proudly. He waves the tech in his hand. "Congratulations, you're the world's first owner of a tachyon detector security system."

The surge of relief that rushes through Oliver at those words is utterly overwhelming. He doesn't have to understand how it works to appreciate what it can do.

"So we'll know before he shows up?" Oliver asks.

"Definitely," Cisco says. "Big, old blaring siren in the house. You should have at least five minutes warning. I'm working on a portable alarm for Ellie to wear. I'll make Felicity one, too, just in case this Zoom dude decides to go all Terminator on you guys."

The gratefulness Oliver feels is tremendous. Before he can think, he closes the distance between them, gripping Cisco's shoulder. The younger man looks up, startled for a split second before a huge smile covers his face. Oliver squeezes him in solidarity… and in thanks. He'd be hard-pressed to think of anyone in his life he has ever owed more.

"*Thank you.*"

"Thank *you* for the best science puzzle of all time! Literally," Cisco counters with a ridiculous amount of glee in his voice. "Get it?"

He does, but he's gonna let it go uncommented on because that's a level of pun Oliver frankly can't appreciate and he's awfully grateful to Cisco at this moment.

"Now that Zoom is a less pressing matter, we need to focus on Slade and Isabel." Lyla looks up from her cell phone before slipping it into her pocket. "My men just messaged me. They've injected Slade. He's still out cold and we don't expect to see any signs of that changing for at least four hours, so we won't know if it's working just yet."

"That gives us only a few hours before we're supposed to hand him over," Sara notes with a grimace as she glances at a clock. "And it's right up until Ollie's supposed to meet Isabel."

"We're going to have to hand him over either way," Oliver says. "We need Thea and Roy back."

"The chip ARGUS put in his spine will allow us to track him back to wherever Isabel wants him to play general," Lyla notes. "Hopefully, we can detonate him after we find the others."

"Woah, wait… Like *boom* detonate?" Cisco asks, a little alarmed. "That's heavy. You guys don't mess around."

"He held my three-year-old by her neck and swore he'd kill her in front of me," Oliver says, leveling Cisco with a steady stare. "You're right. I'm not messing around."

Cisco's hands both go up in a universal sign of backing off.

"Once we find out where he is, we can gas the place with the cure," Lyla informs them. "After it's set in, ARGUS can grab anyone else who'd been dosed before dealing with Slade. We'd prefer to avoid civilian casualties, so timing is going to be critical."

"When isn't it?" Sara asks glibly.

She's not wrong, but looking at the intricate series of circuits and mechanics in Cisco's hands as he tinkers with something that might actually give them an edge against Zoom, Oliver can't help but feel like for the first time in weeks time is something that's actually on their side.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Happy Fourth of July!

Remnant sun rays turn the sky to a dark orange laced with bright pinks, highlighting the thin lines of clouds on the horizon as they sweep over the roofs of Starling City.

The air is crisp, brushing past his face and into his hood, making him shiver. Or maybe that's the anxious nerves that have slowly been growing since he'd talked to Isabel around noon.

"*A phone call, Oliver? I thought you wanted to be here when I was packing up? Let me guess, the lawyers told you all your big moves didn't do all that much?*"

"*You're not worth the gas, Isabel.*"

"*And what about your family's company? That little play with the board was real cute, Oliver, but Moira's games only go so far. You need the full support of the board to vote me off as CEO. You don't have that, and you won't. And it does make me wonder what your family even has left at this point… But that's a talk for another day, isn't it? While I relish describing all the ways I can take this company back, we do have more important business to discuss. You have him?*"

"*I do.*"

"*Then bring him to the QC roof at six sharp.*"

"*Queen Consolidated?*"

"*Yes. Do you need the address? I know it's been a while. Don't get morose, Oliver, that pretty face of yours doesn't need any more wrinkles. If you're one second late with him, little Thea dies.*"

"*... And Roy?*"

"*Roy? Well… he's strictly as-is. He can go either way.*"

"*What the hell does that mean?*"

"*It means I'll see you at six, with Slade Wilson. Don't be late, Oliver.*"

Sara and Oliver land at the same time, their feet hitting the ground with barely-there thuds. The only indication they give of their presence is the soles of their feet sliding on the gravelly roof. It echoes the sharp hiss of their ropes as they release them, followed by a light clang as the pulleys snap the rope back across the street.

They're a full fifteen minutes early, although they'd been scoping out the roof since before the sun went down. There's still no sign of Isabel.

As they step behind an industrial air vent, Oliver presses his hand to his comm, whispering, "We're here."

"I've got you." Felicity's voice comes through crystal clear over the comm. "We've got good guys on the cameras, and bad guys still MIA. And Slade is currently circling up above you." The steady hum of the helicopter hovering over them has been present since they left the manor. He can hear it closing in as Felicity adds, "Like the freaky angel of death that he is."

Oliver smiles.

She'd slept most of the day before the transfer to the safe house. She'd so desperately needed it. It hadn't just been physical exhaustion, it'd been mental and emotional, and the second she'd relinquished control, she'd collapsed. Oliver had checked on her nearly every hour, despite the camera being on her the entire time. She slept through his soft kisses and through Ellie bursting into the room to find her doll. It was close to three when she finally woke. He'd given her all of ten seconds to revisit where she'd been when he'd pulled her away earlier before but that was it. She'd relented much quicker this time.

He'd wrapped her up in his arms, damn near lifting her off her feet as he buried his face against her throat. She'd been pure warmth, a heady mixture of *her* and their bed - including a dash of him in there. He'd inhaled deeply, breathing her in, not willing to let their bliss bubble go just yet. Too much waited for them outside their bedroom door. Instead of filling her in right away, he'd whispered, "*Do you remember what you were dreaming about?*"

"*Mm, I mostly remember a lot of tears and feeling like my chest was caving."* That'd had him holding her tighter. "*But then a certain guy came and knocked some sense into me."*

"*So that's a no."*

"*I remember closing my eyes with you and then opening them a second*

later to find you'd moved. And apparently seven hours had passed. Guess I was a little bit tired. But only a little, so you can take that knowing look and pfft. Why do you ask?"

"*You talked about Nate."*

"*Nate… like our Nate?"* His heart had skipped a couple beats at that. "*What'd I say?"*

"*You just said you had him, that's all. Like there was even a question."* One of her hands had fluttered to her stomach, making Oliver smile. "*Not now, obviously. But… you had him. It just reminded me of what we're doing here. And that it's all worth it as long I have you, and the family you give me."*

"Okay, so…" The sharpness in Felicity's voice jolts him back to reality. Sara pauses next to him, her eyes flying to his in reaction as well. "She's actually already there."

"What?" Oliver frowns, and leans over to glance around the rooftop. It's a limited view, but it's enough to tell that they're alone. "Felicity, no one's up here."

"Yeah, I know," Felicity replies in a hurry. "I didn't mean up there-there." Her rustling clothes tell him she's shifting, as does her soft, "Damn it."

"What's wrong?" Oliver immediately asks.

"This damn tachyon detector that Cisco made for me. It's super handy but so not easy to wear. Gotta talk about something a little more smooth. If it's gonna be this big and clunky with wires *everywhere*, he could've at least added a little pizzazz. How come Ellie got the smaller one? I get it, she's smaller, but this thing is just…"

"Felicity."

"It's caught on the edge of the desk… Alright, that's better." Her fingers fly over the keyboard before she pauses. "She's already in the building, she's been there the entire time."

"With Thea and Roy?"

"No. Just Thea."

"Just Thea?" Oliver repeats, his voice hardening. "Then where's…?"

"I don't know where Roy is," Felicity replies, a little too quickly. The slight edge of hysteria following each of her words is painfully evident, and he knows she's back to that morning when all she'd been able to concentrate on was finding them. "And I'm almost willing to bet money that he isn't there, because that feels like a very Isabel thing to do. I mean, he could be there, that's possible, but I don't see him. And I'm looking."

"I know you are," he says, his voice softening slightly. He wants to tell her it'll be okay, but he has no idea if that's true, and the last thing he wants to do is lie to her. The assumption had always been that Isabel would bring Thea and Roy, because she didn't have a reason not to - they were leverage, that was it. This changed things.

"Thea's unconscious," Felicity adds.

A fiery rush of anger floods his veins as Oliver's hand flies to the button of his comm. "Is she alive?"

The very *idea* that she might not be has that anger collecting in a simmering ball in the pit of his stomach. His idea of killing people had changed dramatically ever since Tommy died. It'd been a rude awakening at the fragility of life, the true scope of what he was doing when he killed someone finally hitting him. The last few weeks had changed that, but only slightly. He'd let Slade live, something that he simultaneously regretted and was grateful for, since it was going to get him Thea back in one piece. But only barely. If anything happened to her in the process, he had no qualms about gutting Slade and Isabel and putting them both down permanently.

"She's alive," Felicity replies, "as far as I can tell. She looks alive, at least, which is good. Although I can't really see her because someone's carrying her. Not very nicely, I might add." The imagery has Oliver gritting his teeth. "Not that you needed to hear that. Obviously. Okay, I'm shutting up, I'm clearly not helping anything. They're almost there."

"Which door?" Oliver asks on a growl.

"The one at the southeast corner."

Just as the words leave Felicity's mouth, the door opens and a group of burly men file out before Isabel appears. The air of confidence around her is tangible. She's incredibly frail-looking compared to the seven men she keeps around her, but the look on her face says she could kill them all if she wanted to. It's that surety that got her this

company… that probably got her his father, too.

The last man who comes out is carrying Thea. She's completely limp in his arms, her head and arms dangling, jostling precariously with each move.

Isabel glances back, waving dismissively for him to set his sister on the ground - the cold, hard ground. The man drops her like a sack of potatoes. She lands with a heavy thud, her limbs falling at awkward angles, her head lolling without support.

Before Oliver knows it, he's moving.

Sara grabs his shoulder with a hissed, "Ollie, *wait*," before he can dart out and put an arrow through the man's hands for even *thinking* he could touch Thea.

Oliver barely listens to her, and it's only when Felicity whispers, "It looks like she's okay," that he stops.

Isabel checks her watch before looking up.

"I know you're here, Oliver."

Felicity makes a tiny noise. "So much for *that* surprise."

Isabel takes a few steps closer to them, looking around casually. "I find it endlessly amusing that you're so early for this meeting," she says, her voice echoing across the rooftop. "Yet you couldn't be bothered to show up for that CEO position you suddenly want so badly. Guess I didn't realize the proper incentive was your sister."

Oliver practically snarls as he steps out towards her. The second he makes his presence known, Isabel's hand flies up and the man who'd been holding Thea lifts his foot and places it over her throat. Oliver freezes at that, his lips pulling back. The boot hovers, just enough to remind him that this isn't over just yet.

He grits his teeth before slowly closing the distance between him and Isabel. Sara's instantly at his side. Oliver tries not to focus on his sister's unmoving form as he says, "You're going to lose everything, Isabel." The dark promise is evident in his voice and it wipes the smirk right off her face. "And I'm going to enjoy every second of watching every last thing you've worked for slip through your fingers."

His words hang in the air between them before she sighs. "I'm getting

tired of your empty threats," Isabel counters. She makes a show of glancing at her nails. "I'm a busy woman, Oliver. I have a lot to do and you're wasting my time. Now give me Slade and I'll give you what's left of your sidekick."

That has him tensing, and he fights the urge to look around, despite knowing Roy isn't up there. He tries not to notice the quiet little sob Felicity makes through the comm or the way Sara sucks air in through her teeth as she adjusts her grip on her bo. The idea that Roy might be gone, that he might be dead at Isabel's hands because they were too slow, because they hadn't found him… God, Oliver can't even imagine what that would do to them all. What that would do to him.

He grits his teeth. *No*, he will not lose anyone else.

"Where's Roy?" Oliver demands.

The smirk that slithers across Isabel's lips is nauseating.

"He's feeling a bit… *drained* at the moment," Isabel advises with faux sweetness. Oliver doesn't realize he's stepping towards her until Sara grabs his arm to stop him. Isabel merely smiles. "But if we finish this up quickly enough, you might have a chance to save his life. It should still be possible, but I'm not making any promises. So, if I were you, I'd hand over Slade now, grab your friends and get the hell out of *my* town before it eats you alive."

"This city will never be yours," Oliver spits.

Sara's hand tightens on his shoulder and he glances at her. Her eyes are glued on Isabel, but the grave look playing across her face still reels him in. Isabel might be both crazy and vindictive, but she's probably not wrong about the urgency in helping Roy. That doesn't seem like an empty threat and Oliver's learned the hard way not to underestimate Isabel Rochev.

Isabel raises an eyebrow. "Just like this company won't be mine?"

"Actually…" The voice jars both Oliver and Isabel. Everyone on the roof reacts at the unexpected guest, the sound of sharp inhales and withdrawn guns filling the air. "It's not."

Goddamned Malcolm Merlyn. The older man steps out of the shadows, fully dressed in his League of Assassins gear. It sends an ugly chill down Oliver's spine, remembering the last time he'd seen him dressed that way. It'd also been on a roof, and they'd also been playing with

life or death. Really, Oliver should have known he would show up. As difficult and amoral as he can be, Malcolm has shown his twisted sense of devotion to Thea.

While it still twists his insides just thinking about the role Malcolm's played in his family's history - and he still hasn't let himself think about the implications behind the man's fealty to Thea - Oliver knows he's just given them the advantage here.

And it's painfully obvious he has no love for Isabel.

Malcolm falls in line with Oliver and Sara as he announces, "As of twenty minutes ago, you're out."

Oliver's head whips towards him, his stomach sinking. What the hell does that mean? Felicity scrambles on the other end of the comm, lowering her voice to a whisper as she asks Diggle to grab his mother.

"And I should really believe you?" Isabel asks.

"It's pathetic how naive you are," Malcolm retorts, the smug smirk on his face only emphasizing the blow of his words.

Oliver sees the second the words sink in, the second she believes him. "You can't do that."

"On the contrary," Malcolm hisses out. "It's all in how you play the board, Ms. Rochev. You should know that. Sometimes if you take out the rook that's all you need to down the queen…" The smile he offers her is positively chilling. "So to speak."

"What did you do?" Oliver asks.

"They're weak-willed men, your board, Oliver," Malcolm advises. "Kill one and the others just fall into line, quivering in their overpriced loafers."

Oliver is perfectly still at that revelation. He's more than well aware of the others on the roof, but the logical part of him realizes that if anything happens, it's not him who will react… it's Malcolm. And because their goals are the same right now, the thought of such a loose cannon unleashed makes him pause.

That is never more obvious than when Isabel, proving she has at least some sense of self-preservation, steps back a few paces. The instant she moves, Malcolm's eyes are on her like a wolf on its prey. Isabel

doesn't back down… but she does put one of her men between her and Malcolm. She's not an idiot, Oliver has to give her that.

"You can't just kill the board to get your way," Sara says. Her voice is quiet, but the intensity hidden in-between her words makes the air between the two assassins positively lethal. She stares at him with narrowed eyes, a thousand different meanings that Oliver can't hope to grasp hidden in her gaze.

"On the contrary, Ms. Lance," Malcolm replies. "I can." He raises an eyebrow, looking back at Oliver. "I do believe a thank you is what you're looking for. I just did you a favor." The weight behind that is alarming and Oliver bites his tongue to keep himself quiet. "I'm going to take your lack of gratitude as a sign of shock, Oliver, so I'll forgive you for it. This time." And then it's as if the rest of the people on the roof aren't even there as Malcolm turns his attention back to Isabel. He zeroes in on her. "You, on the other hand… you are not someone worthy of my mercy."

Before any of them can blink, Malcolm has his bow up, an arrow already nocked, the string pulled back… and then it's loose.

Felicity's gasp echoes in Oliver's ear as he steps forward with a shocked, "No," but it isn't aimed at Isabel. It's aimed at the man keeping guard over Thea. Malcolm's arrow is deadly accurate, landing right between the man's eyes.

Time pauses, hesitating, all of them watching the man freeze in shock, his jaw dropping as a thin stream of blood leaks from the point of impact. His jaw opens, like he's about to speak, but before anything can come out, he collapses, barely missing Thea.

Isabel's incensed hiss is echoed only by the sharp groan of the string being pulled back again as Malcolm aims the next arrow at her.

"*Malcolm*," Oliver barks, his hand flying up to ward him off. He moves towards Isabel, his own bow gripped tight as he places himself in front of Isabel and her entourage, just enough to face him. Oliver really doesn't care in the least if Isabel lives or not. Considering the hell she's put him and his family through - and the hell she's promised all of them - he'd be more than happy to see her out of the picture, permanently. But she still has Roy, and Thea's still in a heap at her feet. If they kill her and there's a contingency plan they can't possibly account for, this all could go bad, very, very fast. He speaks slowly, layering each word with warning as he says, "Put your bow down.

Now."

Malcolm's eyes light with anger as he meets Oliver's gaze, but Oliver doesn't waver an inch.

The older man surveys him, almost like he's trying to weigh whether or not to relinquish control. Oliver can't breathe for a long moment. There's so much at stake here and he knows that Roy's life means *nothing* to Malcolm. He'll never know what makes up Malcolm's mind - his guess is simple curiosity - but ultimately, Malcolm's grip finally loosens. As the bow-string goes slack under fingertips, as he defers to Oliver's control of the situation, Oliver doesn't miss the tiny twitch at the corner of Malcolm's eye, or the knowing gleam staring back at him.

Neither of them move - the truce is tenuous, at best. It's *been* tenuous, ever since he'd come back from the dead. But now the tensions are even higher, the threats coming from everywhere. There are too many people, too many variables, and while Isabel might be wrong about most everything she's said, she's not wrong about needing to finish this as soon as possible.

"Give me Slade *now*," Isabel snaps. "And trust me when I say there isn't an arrow fast enough to stop me from killing your precious Thea."

Malcolm's the first to break eye contact, his eyes darting to Isabel again. Oliver follows suit, his narrowing at the promise in her voice.

"I'm not kidding, Oliver," Isabel says, her voice rising. "Do you really want to risk her life because you're both too petty to follow through on our deal?"

The words bite and he fights the urge to tell her off, especially because the promise in her voice rings with truth. Oliver glances back at Malcolm, and Oliver knows he's seeing and hearing the same thing.

"*Oliver*," Isabel bites out.

"Fine," Oliver says. "He's here."

With a short nod, he presses his comm, but Felicity beats him to the punch with a quick, "Lyla's already coming down."

As if that's her cue, the steady hum of the ARGUS helicopter suddenly descends. Oliver glances up to find Lyla already looking down at him, her face pinched with unease. She doesn't like this plan, and he knows

it. Lyla's all threats and assets - she weighs things objectively, way more than he can at this point. She isn't thrilled with handing Slade over, blind or not, bomb in his spine or not, mirakuru out of his system or not. But she's willing to play along and mitigate the risks as she goes, and for that, he's exceedingly grateful.

Wind whips at all of them, pressing Oliver's hood flush to his head and sending Sara's blonde locks tangling in her face as the helicopter lowers itself to the Queen Consolidated roof. Everyone moves back to make room for it, squinting as the blades send bits of gravel flying through the air. The noise is deafening, the very air feeling like it's trying to push him back, but Oliver keeps his eyes on both Isabel and Malcolm, not trusting them to maintain the uneasy armistice. But they both play along, at this juncture anyhow, and the helicopter lands with little fanfare.

Lyla is pure nonchalance as she strides off of it, pulling an unconscious Slade along with her, wielding the man's dead weight with surprising ease. He lands on the ground with a dull thud, still unconscious, his wrists and ankles tied together tightly.

"He'd better be alive."

Those are the first words Oliver hears from Isabel's lips as the helicopter blades slow to a stop and the air slowly stops pulsing against them. The utter gall of that statement considering what she's done makes Oliver's chest tighten with anger, and he almost regrets stopping Malcolm a moment ago.

Oliver glares at her. "Come and find out," he challenges, itching for Isabel to be within arm's reach. The longer Thea lies in a heap on the cement, the more the urge to wrap his fingers around Isabel's neck and *squeeze* grows.

"Nice try," Isabel scoffs before turning to one of her henchmen. "Grab him."

"No," Oliver instantly snaps, stepping forward. The men around Isabel tighten in rank, but he only has eyes for her. "Not without giving me my sister."

"You can have her," Isabel replies. "She's useless. And you're an idiot for making this trade."

Oliver's already moving, barely registering Felicity's indignance over the comms fade. For a split second, all hears is the heavy thud of his

heartbeat filling his ears as he rushes to Thea's side. Isabel and her remaining men shift to the side, giving him a wide berth. Ripping his glove off, he checks her pulse - it's a little fast, but that it's present at all has him sighing in relief.

"But since it works in my favor," Isabel continues - her voice is farther away, and Oliver doesn't have to look back to know they're moving, surrounding Slade. "I suppose I shouldn't complain that your little group doesn't have two brain cells to rub together. Sentimental fools."

"That's rich coming from someone whose entire life has been defined by one man's dismissal of her," Sara says, her voice moving farther away as well as she follows Isabel.

Isabel's stony silence is punctuated by her snide, "That's cute."

Oliver's tuned in to the movement behind him: Sara and Lyla surrounding Isabel and her men grabbing Slade while Malcolm comes towards him and Thea. Oliver cups her cheek - she's so warm, it burns his palm - and turns her face to his, whispering, "Thea?" There's no response. She's so still, almost as if she's not breathing, as if she's not alive… but she is because he feels the soft puff of breath when his thumb hovers over her nose. When that tiny breath hits his skin, Oliver finally lets himself exhale.

Malcolm stops next to him. "Is she okay?" His voice is cool, detached, and if Oliver didn't know what he did, he'd assume Malcolm was asking because that's what's proper in situations like this, according to general society standards. Hell, that still might be the case, Oliver doesn't know. And he doesn't have care to figure it out right at that moment, to be honest.

"I think so," Oliver confirms, his voice uneven. He tugs his glove back on, vaguely realizing he's showing way more to Malcolm than he has any business doing, but he'll worry about that later. "She's breathing."

"Oh, thank god," Felicity whispers in his ear.

He's aware of what's going on with Slade and Isabel and there's no question that he needs to go help now that he knows Thea's alright. It is so very dangerous to have Slade free, but Oliver can't stop himself from leaning down and pulling the limp form of his little sister into his arms. He's suddenly a teenager, and she's five, having fell asleep on the sofa with a fever and an upset stomach all over again.

It's like Ellie, he realizes. The need to keep her safe, to hold her close

and keep the dangers of the world at bay is a gut-level instinct he can't deny.

He takes a shaky breath, brushing some of her stringy dark locks away from her face. She seems smaller all of a sudden - is that his imagination or have they not been feeding her?

The fiery need to make Isabel hurt burns in his gut.

"She's going to be okay," he resolves, his voice cracking slightly. He has nothing more than sheer force of will to back that up. "Just as soon as she wakes up."

Oliver cradles Thea close, her head falling backwards. He dips down so it rests against his shoulder instead. It hasn't escaped his attention that Malcolm is still hovering, albeit silently. Which is disconcerting in and of itself.

"That might be a few more hours," Isabel says. "She was a bit feisty."

Oliver looks up to find her smirking at him. The man holding Slade makes his way back over to her. He's unsteady under Slade's heavy girth. The arms and legs of his former friend swing freely, frayed rope hanging from his wrists and ankles. A chill snakes down Oliver's spine at the sight - it was one he'd never thought he'd see again. A low deep tug in the dead-center of his core urges him to end this now, to eliminate this threat. It's a primordial need, one hundred percent driven by what'd happened the last time Slade had been free.

Lyla and Sara still stand close, obviously of the same mind, weapons at the ready.

"She definitely got that Queen family trait of being a huge pain in the ass." Isabel's eyes never leave Oliver. "I didn't want her being more trouble than she already has been."

That has his eyes snapping back to hers, his nostrils flaring as he growls, "If you did anything to her-"

"Relax, Oliver, I didn't hurt her," Isabel says, cutting him. "Too much."

That has anger ripping through his chest like acid and Oliver's ready to retort, but he doesn't get the chance.

Slade groans.

It's tiny, barely audible, but it's *there*.

Oliver's heart stalls as everyone falls silent, everyone spinning to face him. In the next second it's taking off, alarm shooting through him as the unconscious man - who is supposed to be unconscious for at least another ten hours - shifts slightly. Like he's waking up.

"I thought he had enough sedative in his system to kill a horse," Sara hisses, the sound echoing through the comms, amplifying the urgency of what's happening.

"He did," Lyla replies. She cocks her gun where it's still trained on Slade. "It's obviously not working."

"Slade's waking up?" Felicity asks, her voice edged with panic. "How can that be?"

"We had to adjust the dose of diazepam because the mirakuru required us to administer what would have been fatal doses to anyone else," Lyla informs them. "Given Cisco's formula, we scaled it down to stay proportional as the mirakuru left his body."

"Wait," Oliver says sharply, his eyes snapping to Lyla's. "Are you telling me that he's waking up because he still has the mirakuru in him?"

"You people are idiots," Isabel adds dryly, her eyes on Slade. There's no indication if she's heard them or if she's just reveling in her triumph at having him back, relishing her win. He's definitely waking up, but he's clearly battling a cloud of fog in his head, his limbs twitching.

They all ignore her.

Lyla keeps her voice low enough that Isabel can't hear them, her voice brusque as she says, "I'm telling you I don't know what's happening right now." She stares at Slade. "But that's definitely a possibility."

"Oh god, it's not working," Felicity whispers over the comm. "That can't be right… Why isn't it working?"

"Shit," Oliver hisses under his breath.

What now? What do they do? They can't leave him there; the entire plan was based on him staying unconscious, long enough for them to track him, to find both him and Isabel and take them down. But Thea's

still in his arms, still unconscious. He can't risk her again.

Oliver raises his voice. "You have what you wanted, Isabel. Now where is Roy?"

"Right under your nose," Isabel tells him with a tisk. "Or, actually, right under mine. They've been here the whole time, Oliver. I was almost worried you'd find them when you broke through the parking garage, but you didn't stay behind long enough to clean up your mess."

Felicity lets out an impressive string of cursing into the comms.

Oliver blinks. "You kept them at Queen Consolidated?"

"Underneath it, actually. Which makes it so poetic, doesn't it?" Isabel sneers. "To keep her in the ruins of her family's one-time empire."

"Where *exactly* is he?" Oliver demands. It'd be hard to seem threatening while carrying a hundred pounds of dead-weight in his arms on any other day, but not today.

"He's hooked up to the machines in the basement," Isabel says with a lofty air, "Helping create more men for my army." God, it's almost sad how delusional she is. She really believes everything is going her way… which it sort of is, he realizes. "If you're fast, you might get to him while there's still blood in his veins. If you're extremely lucky, you might even manage it before my men wake up and kill you all. But I wouldn't count on it."

"Lyla," Oliver snaps, looking toward the ARGUS agent.

"I'm on it," Lyla confirms, pressing a comm in her other ear that is definitely not Team Arrow's, already barking out orders to her men, men Oliver knows are on standby in a loose radius a mere block away.

Isabel's unfazed. In fact, she looks like she finds the movement her words create *amusing*. For someone whose primary concern has been acquiring a general for her army, she seems shockingly unconcerned with the fate of her soldiers in the basement. Her confidence is terrifying if only because it tells Oliver quite clearly that she's got a plan, she has something else up her sleeve.

He's so damn tired of losing to Isabel Rochev because she's always thinking two steps ahead of him.

Oliver's eyes never leave her as he tells Lyla, "Tell your men to be careful. She won't make this as easy as it sounds. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole basement is boobytrapped."

Isabel's answering scowl is proof enough that he's right. If the ARGUS agents go charging headlong in, they'll probably blow the whole building. He's suddenly intensely grateful that it's evening and there are fewer QC employees in the building.

"They're on alert," Lyla replies crisply.

"Oliver," Felicity says, her voice cutting through the moment. "We've got movement in the building. They're stopping at…"

There's an urgency to her voice that demands attention, but Oliver's focus is suddenly back on Slade…

Slade, whose eyeless face lifts to point his direction. He can't see, but that doesn't seem to make much of a difference. Slade still somehow knows *exactly* where he is.

Felicity's words fade and it's obvious she's seeing him move for the first time because her whispered, "Oh god," fills Oliver's chest with even more dread.

Slade sniffs the air before smiling through tightly clenched teeth, directly at Oliver.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance, kid."

"Oh god," Felicity repeats, sounding sick. He knows she's back in the kitchen, back when this man had held their daughter - back when they'd almost lost everything.

The tension is so thick Oliver can barely breathe for it. It fills his lungs, weighing him down, making everything sluggish and stilted. Slade is many things - vindictive and crazy, violent and righteous - but he's also not wrong. Not about this. And, even though he can't see a way to have avoided this moment, Oliver knows without a doubt that he will regret this. Always.

"Oliver, you need to get out of there." Felicity's voice is insistent, louder to compensate for the emotions choking both of them. "*Now*."

Slade smirks, like he can hear Felicity, even though there's no way he can.

The urge to stand there and all-out panic is almost too powerful to ignore, but he also knows he absolutely cannot.

With a stuttered breath, Oliver readjusts his hold on Thea and steps back - away from Slade - and towards the helicopter. He's dimly aware of Lyla dodging back to the ARGUS vehicle ahead of him, readying it for takeoff. As he makes his way over, he cradles his sister protectively, surveying the roof for the many threats they're currently faced with.

But it's not Malcolm or Isabel or even Slade that has Felicity's voice turning adamant.

No, that threat comes from another wholly unexpected source.

"Police are on the stairs," Felicity tells him. "You have two minutes."

Oliver jerks to a stop. "*What*?"

"I don't know why they're there, but you've got to get out of there. Now, Oliver. Right now."

"Leaving so soon?" Isabel asks, voice dripping with snark. "I guess your little sidekick's life isn't that important to you after all. How interesting."

"You are right about one thing, Isabel," Oliver replies. "Things are about to get *very* interesting."

With that, the door from the stairwell bursts open. Police instantly stream out onto the roof, Detective Lance at the forefront. There's too many to count, but it's impossible to miss that every single officer has their guns out at the ready… and all of them are trained on Isabel.

Lance takes all of five seconds to evaluate the situation, his eyes darting around - his daughter, the Arrow, an unconscious Thea Queen, a helicopter with an official-looking sigil he's probably never seen before being piloted by a woman who looks like she's government, and Isabel, surrounded by a group of men, all likely armed with illegal weapons, and a blind Slade Wilson at her feet.

But that's all he takes, five seconds, before he's moving.

"Isabel Rochev," Lance announces, raising his voice over the helicopter engine roaring to life. "You're under arrest for collusion, kidnapping, assault and plans to commit acts of terrorism. You have the right to

remain silent."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," she says, looking affronted. She steps forward, as if she's not facing a crowd of policemen all aiming their weapons at her. "I am CEO of this company. I haven't done anything. You have the vigilante right over there. They are trespassing and threatening the lives of my employees. *He's* the one you should be arresting, not me."

"*Oliver*." Felicity's voice is a warning in his ear and it's more than enough to have him backing up toward the helicopter. "Hurry."

And then one of the officers catches his steady progress toward the waiting helicopter. The man instantly refocuses his attention, his gun training on The Arrow and the limp girl in his arms. Oliver nearly bites the tip of his tongue, curling around Thea to protect her as the officer commands, "Freeze! Put the girl down and put your hands up."

Lowering his voice, Oliver replies, "I can't do that."

He *won't*.

That response has several of the other officers switching off their safeties, their aim switching to Oliver and Sara.

"Hey!" Lance snaps, holding up a hand in a clear ceasefire gesture. "Hold your fire!"

Slade starts laughing. It's low and disturbingly amused, but it swiftly grows in volume, morphing into a full on riotous laugh with his head thrown back, his empty eyes pointed skyward.

"Your city's going to *burn*," he announces with frightening glee. "And you will never know the peace you seek, kid. You forfeit that a little more every time we meet."

Oliver knows a split second before it happens that Slade is going to attack. He should, after a year as brothers-in-arms on the island, but that doesn't mean he can stop it. He can't. One second he's on the ground and the next he's up, a blur of movement as he strikes.

The first officer goes down with a solid hit of Slade's fist to the solar plexus. The second takes a knee to the stomach and an elbow to the spine with a sickening crack that tells Oliver he won't be getting back up.

Chaos erupts.

There's no time to think, which is almost a relief after spending so long trying to out-maneuver Isabel. As Slade, Isabel and her men attack the policemen, Oliver runs to the helicopter. He places his sister gently on the floor of it before shutting the door, slapping the side before turning back to the fray.

"Go," he orders Lyla, nocking an arrow. He lets it loose, taking down one man. He's already pulling another as Felicity insists, "Oliver, you can't stay!"

"We can't leave," he counters, yelling over the sound of the helicopter coming to life. "Slade will tear the police apart. I can't let that happen. You know that."

The propeller blades start spinning, the air beating against them again, making his bow near useless in the gale-force winds. It slowly starts rising as Lyla gets the helicopter off the roof with Thea safely aboard. But the roof is still in turmoil, something that's only underscored when Slade throws an officer at the helicopter. He lands with a sickening thud on the windshield. Lyla manages to keep it steady and in the air, but the officer doesn't fare nearly so well - his arm is sliced clean off by the rotating blade before he lands with a nauseating thud on the concrete.

But Oliver doesn't have time to worry about that man, not with everything else going on.

All of the officers who'd had their guns trained on him have since shifted their attentions to Slade and Isabel's men. Oliver doesn't trust it to stay that way, but it's something that's working solidly in his favor, and he's not about to let that opportunity slide by.

His arrows fly loose, taking down as many of Isabel's men as he can. More than one accidentally hits an innocent as the fray grows worse, but that's another thing he can't worry about, not yet, especially when Sara lets out a sharp cry when one officer headbutts her with his gun. But she's already reacting, incapacitating him. One officer attacks him, as does one of Isabel's men, and Oliver takes them out as quickly as he can without doing real damage.

It's only when Oliver finds himself mentally counting how many arrows he has remaining that he realizes Malcolm has disappeared. He's not sure *how* or to where, but the magician has pulled his vanishing trick and escaped justice once more. While he's not thrilled

about the megalomaniacal madman evading the law yet again, it undoubtedly makes things simpler for him that he *wasn't* just found by the police with a mass murderer at his side.

His thoughts are sidetracked when someone lets out a blood-curdling scream.

Slade is more-or-less a bull in a china shop, tearing through the bodies in front of him with a rage Oliver's never seen before. It doesn't escape his attention that Slade isn't coming for him - Oliver knows Slade's saving that, for later.

Because he knows about Ellie, about Felicity.

God, Oliver's going to be sick. He did this - all of this is happening because of him.

That feeling only quadruples in intensity when he spots Isabel. He watches her pause before her focus hones in on Lance. The man's back is to her where he's yanking one of her men off one of his, his gun still in-hand, pointing at the sky. The second she spots him, an ugly sneer twists her face.

"Detective, move!" Oliver shouts, shoving his way towards them, but it's suddenly not necessary. Sara's already bolting through the crowd, a blur of white fury as she aims for Isabel. Gunshots fill the air, punctuated by shouts of pain, and it's only when Sara shifts at the last second as she moves that Oliver realizes a bullet narrowly misses her temple.

Another shot fires, this one a loud clap of thunder that drowns the others - a shotgun, one aimed right at Slade. The bullet hits his shoulder, exploding in a spray of blood. It's as if nothing happened though, as if he didn't just have a chunk of his muscle and bone shredded. It's only then that Oliver dimly registers that more than one bullet has hit Slade, but he's not going down. He's covered in blood - some of it's his, some of it isn't - but he's not slowing down in the least.

Cisco's cure is either working slower than expected or not at all.

"Damn it," Oliver hisses.

The implications of that are mind-boggling in their terror, but he doesn't have the chance to focus on that, not now. Not only because there are innocent lives at stake, but because he can't let himself think

about it, or he might crumble. Because he's done it again - he's let Slade go. What will the cost be this time?

His attention is drawn back to Lance and Isabel - the detective turns just in time for her to knock his gun out of his hand. It lands with a sharp clatter, but it's quickly drowned out when she lays into him with a series of brutal punches that make Oliver wince. But then Sara's between them a split-second later. She's pure defensive fury and skill, far surpassing Isabel - she may have been trained by Slade, but very few people are a match for the League of Assassins. It doesn't take long to realize Sara's victory is just a matter of time, as well it should be. The League doesn't tolerate members who can't live up to their name.

The tide slowly shifts. There's far more policemen and they - the ones left standing, that is - start rounding up Isabel's remaining men. They don't have mirakuru in their systems, that much is obvious - likely because Isabel has no idea how to control someone in a mirakuru-induced rage - and for that, Oliver's intensely grateful.

Because a mirakuru-fueled Slade is more than enough for him to deal with.

The police have no idea what to do with him. They'd clearly underestimated him, judging by the carnage littering the rooftop. A barely-conscious man with both eyes missing should have been a piece of cake. That is definitely not the case anymore.

Slade's fully awake now and, blind or not, the few men who've tried to take him on have been soundly beaten. More than one of them won't be getting back up - the unnaturally twisted necks and ever-growing pools of blood attest to that.

A trio of officers inch towards Slade, whose back is turned to them.

"No, get back!" Oliver growls. He's fought at the other man's side enough times to be fully aware that Slade's tracking all of them like the skilled hunter he is, just waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

Oliver's words come too late for one of them. Without warning, Slade's hand whips out. He grabs the man's neck and *squeezes*. The choking noise the officer makes is brief, and it cuts off with a crush of fingers to his windpipe that is absolutely fatal. That doesn't stop the officer's partners from trying to save him - it's instinctual, Oliver realizes that, but it's also futile. Before Slade can do anything to them, Oliver vaults

across the roof, knocking both of them away. His attention on the officers only lasts only a second, but it's a second that Slade capitalizes on.

The other man drops the dead officer and twists just as Oliver lands, grabbing Oliver in a painfully strong grip that twists his arm behind him. Oliver shouts out as his shoulder wrenches, gritting his teeth when Slade yanks him back, putting more pressure on his elbow.

"*Oliver*!" Felicity exclaims over the comms. He can hear the terror in her voice, and it saturates his own. That's something they're going to have to work on. He gets that she's scared - hell, *he's* scared, too; Slade's a terrifying guy - but staying mission-focused is how he stays alive. His rationalization is quickly cut off when she continues, "Get him near the southwest corner. As close to the helicopter as you can."

He barely keeps himself from asking, '*What?'* because that is the last thing he'd expected from her. So, maybe she's more mission-focused than he'd thought. He has no idea why she's requesting that, but it doesn't matter - he trusts her, at the most fundamental level, and he's more than ready to do exactly as she says.

Slade twists his arm further, sending a streak of pain so vivid through Oliver's limb that he groans.

"You made a mistake letting me out, kid," Slade growls. "I trained you better than that. Although maybe I should be thanking you. I do hate unfinished business."

The promise in his voice echoes the uneasy silence on Felicity's end. Oliver snarls, bracing himself before twisting. The pain is extraordinary as he breaks from Slade's powerful hold, but it's enough that Oliver can turn, landing a solid hit on Slade's wrist. His grip slips, and Oliver slams his elbow into Slade's jaw, sending him stumbling back a couple of steps.

"My family is off-limits," Oliver says darkly. "You don't go near them."

"Oh, yes." Slade laughs, wiping a trail of blood from his lips. It stains his teeth, making his smile all the more ghoulish and haunting. "The perfect little family you've made for yourself… the same kind of family you *stole* from so many others, from Shado!" His voice is a vicious roar that echoes over the rooftop. "I'm so looking forward to visiting them again. And your mother. She took something from me. It's only fair I return the favor."

The words are baiting, and Oliver so badly wants to give in to the surge of adrenaline that crashes through his veins - the very one urging him to attack Slade with everything he has - but he doesn't. Felicity's words ring through his head. He moves a few steps in the direction Felicity had indicated, his feet shuffling against the gravel-laden concrete. Slade follows his every move, inching along with him. He tilts his head curiously, like he's trying to suss out precisely what Oliver's doing.

"Maybe I'll spare your daughter," Slade muses. The words are nearly enough to make Oliver trip, his foot catching on the ground, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Slade chuckles at the sound, knowing he's hit a weak spot. "She's young. *Malleable*. Just imagine the things I could teach her."

Oliver's reaction is visceral. He stops, everything stopping, his blood instantly boiling at Slade's words. He's a pretty level-headed guy in a fight - the things he's had to endure, live through, fight through, it's all given him an ability to rise above, to always keep his focus on the mission. But there are some lines - really, *one* line - that can't be crossed.

The violent urge to choke the life out of Slade nearly takes over - he's never wanted anything more in his life than to watch Slade's body twitch one last time as he dies at Oliver's hand.

Oliver's lips pull back in a snarl as he stalks towards him with a guttural, "You son of a *bitch*."

Felicity's voice cuts through everything.

"Lyla, *now*!"

A deafening blast of noise hits them all, as much an assault as anything Slade's done. Every single person on the roof covers their ears, ducking down, trying to evade the piercing noise, but it's useless. The helicopter is emitting a high-pitched shriek that overwhelms all their senses.

But none of them is quite as affected as Slade. He's bellowing, his hands clamped to his ears, every muscle in his body tensed like he's being assaulted with a thousand knives. It takes Oliver all of a second to realize why - he's completely reliant on his hearing. In essence, Felicity and Lyla's move has blinded him.

Oliver takes the opportunity he's been given - he draws an arrow with

a steel cord attached and fires it. The trick arrow bursts upon impact in the center of Slade's chest, snaking around him like a lasso, wrapping him up in a tightly-bound package.

The instant he's captured, Lyla kills the sound. The silence that follows is just as loud as the high-pitched whining had been. It's shattered when Isabel's men suddenly attack again, but they're outnumbered and the police quickly subdue them once more.

"Boom!" Felicity suddenly shouts, her voice ringing with a triumphant grin, making him jump. She's barely audible over the heavy ringing that fills his ears, but Oliver hears it anyhow. "And you're down and out. You stay *the hell* away from my daughter!"

She's not entirely right, though. Slade is down, collapsed to his knees and fully detained by the cord, but he's not entirely out.

And he's got one move left.

Oliver sees it the second Slade reaches the same conclusion that he does - the edge of the building is close. It's a sheer thirty-story drop looming just a foot behind Slade, and he knows it. They both know it.

When Slade makes his decision, Oliver grips the other end of the cord binding Slade with a rough, "No!"

But the other man just smiles… and then he throws himself backwards off the roof.

"No!" Oliver shouts again, and just as quickly, he braces himself, unwilling to let him get away.

He vaguely hears Felicity's shouts in his ear in concert with Sara's behind him.

The sudden pull on the cord nearly jerks him right off his feet, sending him stumbling toward that same sharp drop. Instinct has him digging in his heels and tightening his hold on the steel rope. It bites him even through his gloves, leaving cutting burns along his palms that make him shout in pain. Everything burns - his hands, his muscles, *everything* - as he tries to hold on.

Somewhere beneath him, he hears a crash of glass and then there's a solid yank on the line that damn near pulls him right over the edge. He barely keeps himself from going over, falling to his knees for more leverage.

"Oliver, let go."

Felicity's voice is unsteady in his ear.

He doesn't want to. He *can't.* They had Slade - they *had* him - and now Oliver's literally clinging to him by a thread. He doesn't want to go back to looking over his shoulder, to worrying about Ellie and Felicity and his mother and his sister every moment of the day. Not from this threat.

Not again.

"You can't hold on," Felicity says calmly, although the tremor of anxiety is very, very evident. "He'll take you down, too. You have to *let go*."

"What about the bomb? The chip?"

"I… I tried that earlier, actually," Felicity replies. "It didn't work."

"What?" he hisses.

"I tried it when we learned the cure wasn't working, because the idea of that man…" She stops herself, and Oliver closes his eyes. "We already had Thea and we knew Roy was nearby. That was all that mattered, so I hit the button. But it didn't work, and I don't know why. There might be interference or Amanda Waller might have noticed something hinky, I don't know, but now is so not the time to talk about it, okay? Because he's literally pulling you off the side of that damn building and you need to *let go*, Oliver." She takes a deep breath. Her next words come out slowly, like she really wants him to hear her. "ARGUS has men heading up to the floor he crashed through. And there are cameras throughout the building and… a-and we can track him with body heat if we have to, alright? He's not going anywhere, Oliver. We won't let him. They have darts loaded with ketamine. Those worked before. We just need to up the dosage. They'll fire all the darts they have. Okay? Just please… let go."

She's reasoning with him, he knows that… but he *can't let go*. Especially if the chip isn't working, especially if he still has mirakuru in his system… he *can't.*

"Oliver," she whispers. "*Please.*"

The pleading in her voice is ultimately what breaks through to him.

It's a physical effort to force his fingers to relax and let go of the metal rope. Everything in him says not to do it, to hold on, to *fight*, but Felicity's right. God, when isn't she? Holding onto Slade right now will only get him killed and he needs to trust his allies to have his back, even when it's hard. *Especially* when it's hard.

Oliver lets go.

A whirring noise accompanies the braided metal cord as it slides against the concrete edge of the roof, sending little sparks flying off of it. And then it's gone, along with Slade.

He wants to vomit.

How the hell had this happened?

Felicity is silent, knowing anything she says won't make this better. And just as quickly as she enters his mind, a rush of guilt is quick to follow - he'd been absolutely willing to go over that ledge if it meant getting Slade. He'd been ready to end his life to ensure nothing happened to his family.

The ramifications of that, especially *now*, in *this* time, rattles him.

She must be able to tell because she whispers, "It's okay, Oliver."

"We've got Roy," Lyla says, cutting in before he can respond to Felicity. Oliver jerks like she's hit him with a bolt of electricity. *Roy's okay*. Oliver exhales slightly, his shoulders sagging. Just hearing that smooths over the edges of his uneasiness… but it doesn't go away completely. "He's in bad shape, but my guys think he'll make it."

"Good," Oliver chokes out, standing. He turns to the helicopter, trying to find Lyla's gaze. "The others? The men she infected?"

"In the basement lair, too, but unconscious," Lyla confirms. "I've got men trying to get them off the machines while still keeping them knocked out. We don't need to be dealing with more than one mirakuru-dosed killer. Slade's enough."

She's so not wrong.

"And your men going after Slade?" he asks.

"En route," she replies. "I'll keep you updated."

"And what about the chip in Slade's spine?" he continues, darkness

edging his tone. "Why didn't it work?"

Lyla hesitates, just enough to tell him she doesn't know. "I'll have to get back to you on that one, Oliver," she says.

His stomach sours. It's not enough. It's not even close, but right now that's the best answer she can give him. He appreciates her honesty, something he acknowledges with a quick nod.

"You sonuva bitch."

The vitriol in Lance's voice is thicker than Oliver can ever remember hearing. It's grief more than hate, but Oliver is very well aware of how easy it is to confuse the two. Especially when it comes to this man. And it's not like he's blameless - if Oliver hadn't been here, Slade wouldn't have been either. If it hadn't been for his family, Isabel wouldn't even be an issue.

Oliver bows his head.

"I got six men down," Lance spits out, "an' four of 'em ain't gettin' back up."

Oliver swallows hard, his throat closing at that. There are always casualties in war, but these people didn't have to be. Maybe it's an exercise in self-blame, but Oliver slowly turns to face the older man. He's crouched next to a badly wounded officer, trying to staunch the bleeding from a gut-wound that won't be healing. The kid's young, can't be much older than Thea. Maybe fresh out of the academy. Oliver knows he'll remember the young man's face for the rest of his life, just like all the other ones past saving, the others who've died because of him and his choices.

"You got nothin' to say to me?" Lance bites out.

The harsh accusation slices through him.

Oliver fights to take a steady breath, struggling for equilibrium. His eyes slide to where Sara has Isabel fully restrained. It's one of the few things that went right tonight, aside from rescuing his sister and Roy. And he can't regret that even if he tried. He then surveys the carnage surrounding them - most of the downed men are officers.

It's a long moment before Oliver replies grimly, "You shouldn't have come."

"The hell we shouldn't've!" Lance counters. "We're the cops. *We're* the law. Somethin' you seem to have a hard time remembering. Now I got wives and husbands and mothers I gotta call to tell 'em somebody they love ain't ever coming home because you just gotta take playing the hero too damn far. Well, let me tell you something. Today? Today you *failed*, and I got real heroes dead at your feet because of it."

The words hit Oliver right in the gut, a sucker punch that steals the air out of his lungs. He looks away, unable to keep meeting the other man's eyes, unable to see the truth in his gaze.

"He's wrong, Oliver," Felicity says in his ear.

No. He's not.

"That's not fair," Sara adds.

Lance whips his head back to look at his masked daughter, his hands never leaving the young man's wound. Blood seeps between his fingers as he snaps, "Know what's not fair? The number of funerals I'm gonna have to attend in the next week. That's what's not fair."

"We had no way of knowing you'd even be here," Oliver insists.

"An' you shouldn't have!" Lance insists, spinning to face him again. "I was behind you. I believed in you and I believed in what you were doin'. But I can't do that when *this* is the result. When you gonna get this through that thick skull of yours? Your brand of good is not the law. The law comes first. We don't answer to you."

Oliver can only stare at him. He never asked for that responsibility, not ever, but the veracity in the detective's voice is like a serrated blade cutting through him. He had Lance's trust, as feeble and delicate as it was, and now it's gone.

Lance shakes his head, looking at the officer laid out before him. He shakes his head, muttering, "Hell, the minute my hands ain't covered in my men's blood, I'm gonna put the full force of the department into hunting you down." He looks up. "In holding you accountable for this."

The officer suddenly jerks, blood bubbling past his lips as he whispers, "Detective…" in a garbled voice, fighting for words against the blinding pain he must be in.

"I got ya, kid," Lance tells him, locking eyes with the gravely wounded man. "Don't try to talk. Just hang on. Help's on the way, ya hear me?"

"Not his fault," he manages. He smiles with blood-stained lips and glassy eyes. It's shock setting in that lets him do that, and it's chilling. Oliver's seen it dozens of times, maybe *hundreds*. That doesn't make it any easier in this moment. The man nods his head towards Oliver. "Woulda lost more without him."

Lance dismisses his words completely, rearranging his hands on the boy's stomach as he says, "Don't stress yourself, Jimmy. You're talkin' nonsense. Just rest."

"My mom…" the officer - *Jimmy* - gasps. "Tell her…" But whatever he's going to say gets lost in a final exhale of breath. And then he goes still.

"No," Lance rasps. He stares at the kid, pressing harder on the wound, like stopping the bleeding now will make all the difference, but it's useless. He's gone. "*No*, damn it." His hands tighten into clenched fists, his body curving over the fallen officer's like a protective shield. For a long moment, the older man doesn't even breathe. But when he does, it's a sharp, large inhale as he looks up at The Arrow with furious, wet eyes. He stands, his voice rising as he says, "You *goddamned son of a bitch*."

The intent is clear in his eyes as he stalks towards Oliver with blood-stained, white-knuckled fists. Oliver doesn't move, just clenching his jaw. He'll let Lance punch him, because he's responsible. Maybe not directly, but indirectly…

It's all his fault.

But then everything suddenly shifts on a dime.

"Oh god… Get out!" Felicity cries out. "Get away from the building! Now. Now. Right now. All of you. *G*o!"

"What is it?" Oliver snaps, the urgency in her voice springing him into action. In the blink of an eye, he pushes everything with Lance and the dead officers down. He's wildly alert, keenly aware of everything going on around him.

In the distance, the dim sound of an alarm is going off.

"Is that…?"

"Fire alarm," Lyla fills in, her voice taut. "There's a situation." The depth of meaning in her voice has the hair on the back of Oliver's neck

standing up. The helicopter engine is suddenly much louder. "I'm coming down. We don't have time to land. You're going to have to jump."

Oliver doesn't stop to ask questions, her words propelling him into action. He does, however, stop for Lance.

"You can hit me later, Detective," he advises, raising his voice to be heard over the din of the helicopter blades. "But right now we need to get out of here."

"The hell we do," Lance shouts, jabbing his hand in emphasis as he continues. "I got a job to do! I can't leave after the mess you made."

Oliver closes his eyes briefly - he gets it, he *does*, but it doesn't change the reality of their situation. Something is very wrong, and they need to get off this roof. *Now*.

And Lance is coming with them whether he likes it or not.

"You were right about the boobytrap," Lyla informs him.

A sharp chill races down Oliver's spine. He's already moving, grabbing Lance by the wrist and yanking him along toward the edge of the building as he demands, "How long?"

"What the hell are you doing?" Lance snaps, trying to pull away, but he's no match for Oliver.

"Less than two minutes," Felicity says. "And it's not networked. I can't do anything. I can't…" She pauses before whispering, "Oh god, Oliver, please get out of there. If you die I'm going to absolutely kill you."

Oliver turns back to Lance. "Order your men to get out. Tell them to run. Their lives depends on it."

A dull sound suddenly echoes up from the base of the building, one that sounds suspiciously like an explosion. The ground underneath them shakes slightly.

"Oliver, *go*," Felicity shouts. "Now!"

"What did you do?" Isabel shouts, sheer terror shading her eyes. "You *idiots*, you actually tried to unhook them? You tripped the bombs?"

"*Bombs*?" Lance repeats, looking toward Isabel just as the helicopter appears.

"No time," Oliver snaps. The side-door to the helicopter opens and Lyla holds it as steady as she can next to the building. "Everybody on!"

Isabel's already rushing forward without an ounce of provocation, right toward the ARGUS transport. If there'd been any question in Oliver's mind about how serious these bombs were, that would have resolved them immediately. She throws herself aboard, Sara hot on her heels.

"Jump, Detective!" Oliver orders.

He hesitates, looks behind them, where he's got men too injured to walk, too gravely wounded to do *anything*. They're facing certain death and Oliver watches as the reality of the situation washes over Detective Lance. He wishes with everything in him that the other man didn't have to face this decision, wishes he could take it for him… but he can't. It's Lance's choice, and he *has* to make the right one.

"You can't save them," Oliver tells him, lowering his voice to appeal to him, as much as he can over the noise. There's another explosion and they feel it more readily this time, the gravel shaking at their feet. "But you can help me avenge them, Detective. If you jump. *Now*."

Sara's holding out her hand from the helicopter and even from where he's standing, Oliver can see the fear in her eyes at the indecision on her father's face.

There's another explosion, and this time the ground *shakes*. The building's still standing though, and Oliver knows it's because these are the bombs strategically placed throughout the foundation of the building, triggered to go off before the main ones probably placed right underneath them. They're weakening the infrastructure, so when the final ones hit, all of Queen Consolidated will fall.

Horror makes Oliver's mouth ashy, but he doesn't move. Not yet. He stares at Lance, willing him to make the right choice.

"Forty-five seconds," Felicity says urgently. "Oliver, *please*."

The sound of her voice washes through him. Part of him wants to wait for Lance to jump, to make sure the older man follows through and saves himself - a month or two ago, he probably would have. But not now. Not when he has Ellie to think about, Felicity to consider; not when he has so much in his life worth holding onto.

"*Go*."

Oliver jumps, landing with a thud of his feet against the the solid metal floor of the helicopter, grabbing onto the edge of the open doorframe. An ARGUS agent has Isabel at gunpoint, his sister's still in a heap on the floor and Sara's still hanging out of the door, reaching desperately for her father. Oliver joins her, matching her stance.

Lance is staring back at his men though.

Another bomb goes off, this one louder, sending out a rippling boom that echoes all the way up from the street.

"Jump," Felicity whimpers. "Please. Get out of there. Go, go, go…"

"*Dad*!" Sara begs. "Come on!"

It's her personal appeal that does it, Oliver decides later when he has time to think about it. Had Sara not been there, had she not pleaded as his daughter for his survival, he might well have gone down with his men. But she is there, and that makes all the difference.

Lance jumps. He makes it, but his landing is nowhere near as graceful as Oliver's was. His shoulder connects hard with the metal floor, jarring his arm and forcing a yelp of pain from the older man.

"*Go*!" Oliver shouts to Lyla.

Before the word has even finished leaving his mouth, she's pulling the helicopter away from the building. They all hold on as she veers away with wild jerks, fighting to get them away just as much as trying to get them *up*.

And it's not a moment too soon because everything suddenly happens in very, *very* quick succession after that.

The final boom that echoes through the air is thunderous. The explosion is a physical force, one that moves up in sharp waves.

For a split second, nothing happens - everything is perfectly still, like the world is holding its breath… and then it all falls apart.

The building itself looks like it takes a sharp inhale - the walls bend in, the roof caving in with a violent wave that makes it look like it's liquid instead of something solid. It's alarming as much as it's shocking, because things as concrete as skyscrapers aren't supposed to do that.

Before any of them can process what they're seeing, the building suddenly blows outward with a ear-splitting crack. Oliver feels like he's turning inside out as the building explodes in a billowing shower of concrete powder and flames.

The pressure of the blast shoves the helicopter sideways, sending everyone inside the aircraft careening into the far wall as heat from the rising ball of fire licks at their skin. Alarms from the front sound as Lyla shouts, vying for control, doing her best to get them away.

Oliver's barely aware enough to leap for his sister, covering her body with his, protecting her as much as he can.

They aren't far away enough to escape the debris that launches at them. Dust and broken concrete rocket through the open door - it coats his skin, filling his lungs. He can't see, he can't breathe, he can't do anything but *hold on* as Lyla pushes them up higher and higher.

It lasts forever as much as it lasts a second and before he knows it, the air is clear… clear enough to breathe at least. It's not enough though, and it won't be for a long time as Oliver turns to look back out at what they're leaving behind.

"Oh my god," Sara breathes, her voice choked with dirt and amazement.

His heart lodges in his throat as he watches his family's legacy crumble before his eyes, everything they'd worked for falling in a twisted heap of metal, concrete and glass. Sirens wail in the distance. Screams so loud they can be heard over the helicopter's blades cry out from the streetside.

"*Oliver!*"

His ears are ringing again, shock settling in.

He only has eyes for the building.

"Tell me you're okay," Felicity pleads from the comm. "I mean, Ellie's playing with her doll on the bed so I think you're okay, but Oliver, I need to hear your voice."

For a second, he can't reply. He doesn't have words as he watches flames totally engulf the broken Q in Queen Consolidated where it lays on the street. Nausea rips through him, twisting his insides, sending bile dancing up the back of his throat.

"*Oliver*," Felicity says again.

"He's okay," Sara replies for him, barely above a whisper. She'd moved to her father's side at some point, but she leans over, laying a hand on his shoulder as Felicity releases a sharp breath of relief over the comm. "And so is Thea."

"Yeah," Oliver says. His voice is a rasp, barely audible. "Sorry, I…"

Ash and powdered cement coat his tongue. It sits heavily in his mouth, tasting like failure and death, and for a moment he finds he can't speak again.

But then Sara's words catch up to him.

He's okay.

So is Thea.

Oliver closes his eyes for a second before turning back to his sister. She's just as messy, her already ashen skin coated with debris, but she's okay. Oliver brushes her hair from her face, smoothing the ash from her forehead. He takes off his glove again, pressing his palm to her cheek. She's still too warm, but she's alive.

They all are.

Oliver hears the others talking, checking on each other, reporting in. He hears Felicity responding and Digg when he grabs a comm to talk to Lyla. They're all speaking, some of them to him, but he isn't listening. Not yet.

He slowly sits up. His joints and bones fight him every bit of the way, and he winces as he looks back at Queen Consolidated.

Rather, what's left of it.

He suddenly can't breathe. For as long as he can remember that building has stood there, tall and proud, a symbol of everything his family had built - literally from the ground up. And now, in the blink of an eye, it's all gone, leaving a black hole where it used to stand in the cityscape.

They didn't win, there's no way they can call this a win, not when he looks at his family's building or at Lance's utterly broken face. He can't bring himself to think about how many people might have still been in

the building, or how many ARGUS men were still there, or the police officers they'd left behind.

But Thea's alive and home. ARGUS got Roy out. Isabel's under arrest. And he will live to fight another day, to go home and hug his daughter and kiss his… his Felicity.

They didn't win, no. They lost in more ways than one today… but it wasn't *all* a loss.

Even as he watches the ruins of his family's company go up in flames, a tiny sliver of light pierces through the despair filling his chest - maybe when it comes to preserving his family's legacy, he protected the most important parts of it.

Chapter 29

By the time Lyla brings the helicopter back down, the streets are filled with sirens and shouts of surprise and dismay as the dust from the building collapse starts to settle. The air is still thick with ash, even several blocks away. As they all disembark, trying to get their bearings, dusting off their clothes and coughing to clear the debris from their lungs, Oliver recognizes where they are. Lyla's landed them on one of the closest skyscrapers, and it just so happens to be the roof of Merlyn Global.

It's now the tallest building in the city. Queen Consolidated used to be taller.

The sight of the lit-up floors in the surrounding buildings makes his gut twist.

"What good am I all the way over here?" Lance snaps. His eyes are on the dull glow of the flames still visible, on the billows of smoke spiralling into the air.

"It's too dangerous to land closer," Oliver answers. He'd barely had the state of mind to turn his modulator on, but he's sure even if he hadn't, his voice would be garbled enough from the smoke to disguise it anyway.

"Too dangerous?" Lance repeats, spinning back to face him. "You're joking, right? Because the only dangerous thing I'm seein' right now is you."

"Dad," Sara says, her voice filled with caution as she hops off the helicopter. "Take it easy."

The older man is several steps past angry and is heading straight into a grief-stricken hell. His face is twisted with guilt-ridden pain as he turns to face his daughter. His hand shakes as he points at her.

"There's no taking anything easy right now, Sara," he replies. "Not after what just happened, after the men I lost. The *good* men I just lost. And the ones I left behind…"

Oliver wonders if it's just him who hears the '*... because you asked me to.*'

"I know," Sara replies with a solemn nod. Her voice is quiet, barely touched by the ash. The muted horror of what just happened burns through loud and clear. Without another word, she turns to the back of the helicopter, grabbing the small bundle of her street clothes and ducking inside to change quickly. The city might need the Canary right now, but Lance needs his daughter. Sara's priorities have always been clear.

"So what?" Lance asks, accusing eyes finding Oliver again. "You gonna just leave me here to dig through the debris on my own? After all this?"

"You aren't the only one who lost people in that building, Detective," Oliver informs him. The company may not have been his the entire time, but he was still responsible for the people who worked there - for the people who had still been in there tonight. It might have been evening, but QC was never truly empty.

Alarm colors Lance's face. "Felicity Smoak? She wasn't…"

"No," Oliver replies immediately. The mental image of Felicity buried beneath the wreckage fills his mind - bleeding, broken, crying out for him… He grimaces, shaking his head to get rid of it. It's too reminiscent of Tommy's death, far too easy to picture her there. The very thought has nausea slamming into him. "No. She's safe."

"Good," Lance says, clearly unsettled. "Good. She's a good kid."

"Damn it," Felicity sighs through the comm. Her voice is light, and he can tell she's forcing it; he can hear the tremor behind her words, the reality of what just happened evident. He knows she's doing it for his sake just as much for hers. "Just when I was starting to resolve that my future step-dad is sort of an enormous jerk, he goes and says that. Glad you didn't die, too, dad." That statement makes Oliver jerk, but before he can wrap his mind around it, Felicity's continuing, "Which is just beyond bizarre to say out loud. You know what's not bizarre? My mother freaking out about Detective Lance almost dying. Let's keep this between all of us, because she's already called ten times since the building collapse completely took over the news."

The steady stream of her voice in his ear is calming. Oliver closes his eyes, taking a deep breath, enjoying it. Because he can; because he's alive. They didn't save everyone, but he can't bring himself to feel too guilty about surviving because it means he gets to go home to his family. And that's a damn miracle if there ever was one. The irony of

his recognizing that isn't lost on him.

"You wanna know who waits for no man?" Felicity asks. Oliver's lips quirk slightly, not answering because he knows she's just talking. "This daughter of yours. She's apparently 'super starving'."

"I *am* super starving, Momma," Ellie adds, her voice smaller through the comm, but audible enough to have Oliver taking a choked breath, his chest filling with gratitude and love. The sound of it is like a soothing balm, one he didn't realize he needed in that very moment. He's alive, which means his daughter still is. The desire to see them is damn near overwhelming. He knows there's more to do here, so much more, but he's almost willing to let it all go just to hold them in his arms right this very second. "Come on!"

"Now that we're more or less in the clear," Felicity says, "I'm gonna go attempt chicken nuggets. And before you say anything, mister, I have backup at the ready. John is going with me, he'll make sure I don't burn the safe house down. Pretty sure ARGUS wouldn't appreciate that, especially because this is a *nice* hideout." Oliver can't stop his small smile this time and he bows his head. His eyes are still closed as he revels in his Felicity. He's pretty sure she's rambling just for his sake at this point. "Anyway, hurry home. I love you."

I love you, too.

And he hopes to God she's joking about the chicken nuggets. It's just a microwave, right?

"Is that Daddy?" Ellie asks, her voice suddenly closer, as if she's launched herself into her mother's arms. "Love you, Daddy!"

He almost responds before biting his tongue. The sound of clothes rustling echoes over the comm as Felicity catches Ellie with a breathless, "He loves you, too, baby," - and God, he does, so much, and he wants to say it to her right now - before she says to him, "See you soon. We love you."

Oliver turns his head so the words don't carry as he offers a quiet, "Yeah." He puts everything in that simple word that he can't say in present company. "See you soon."

With a soft, "Be careful, make smart choices," she switches her comm off, severing their connection. It only makes him want to get back to her even more.

As Sara joins them again, reemerging from the helicopter with all traces of the Canary gone, Lance clears his throat, demanding attention.

"You wanna do good? You wanna save the city, *Arrow*?" the detective asks. The snideness in his words hit Oliver like tiny knives slicing through him. "How's about you help me dig for survivors, huh? Help us mourn the dead that fell in *your* battle."

He wishes he could, he truly does. There's more ways to save the city than taking down bad guys, but Oliver has too much to do and too little time to do it in.

"I have to bring Isabel in," Oliver says. "And I need to work on a plan to stop Slade, because he's still out there. He wanted this city burned to the ground before, and he will again. I don't have the luxury of grief, Detective."

"You're a real bastard, you know that?" Lance challenges. All-in-all, Oliver takes that as a good sign. The detective without fight in him is a foreign thing that Oliver never wants to see. "An' what makes you think *you're* taking in Rochev? Where the hell are you taking her?"

"To me," Lyla chimes in. She steps off the helicopter with an air of authority that is palpable. Another ARGUS agent takes her place in the pilot's seat as she steps up to Lance. "She's in my custody now, Detective."

Lance bristles. "An' who the hell are you?"

"Agent Lyla Michaels, but my agency is classified," Lyla replies smoothly. She pulls out some non-descript sort of badge that is absurdly generic but somehow grants her authority. "All you need to know is I'm taking over the handling of Isabel Rochev." She slips her badge back into her pocket, her voice grim as she adds, "I've already called for backup to come help clean-up."

"Oh, that's real nice of you," Lance says with a sneer. "Cause a mess like this, people losin' their lives, and you send a cleanup crew." He doesn't wait for a response before jabbing his thumb in Oliver's direction. "So you're tellin' me he's government sanctioned?" Lyla pinches her lips, but Lance keeps going. "My tax dollars at work, huh?" He narrows his eyes at Oliver. "Was wondering where you got the chopper from."

"I'll stay," Sara reminds him. She's calm, attempting to diffuse the

tension. Oliver's not sure it works even a little bit. "I'll help you look for your men, too. Okay?" She turns to Oliver. "I'm leaving my weapons with you, but I'll keep my comm unit on in case there's an emergency."

"If you see any sign of Slade…" Oliver starts, his tone heavy with warning.

"We'll run," Sara confirms.

Lance scoffs. "The hell we will."

"*Dad*, we will," Sara repeats, leaving no room for dispute. "You saw what he's capable of. We can't take him on. Not right now. Not without a plan." She looks back at Oliver. "And not without help."

"Ain't no way he survived that anyhow," Lance says, waving back at where the building once stood. The flames have died down, lessening the glow of the fire on the horizon, but the smoke is just as heavy, the air still foggy with dust. Lights from multiple emergency vehicles make the sky glow. "If we find him, we'll be findin' a body."

"Don't underestimate Slade Wilson," Oliver says, the words coming out harsher than intended. But he's back on that roof, back with the choice of letting him go or going after him, stopping him once and for all… Oliver knows deep in his gut that that isn't the last time he'll be seeing his old friend. And it's all because of him. He narrows his eyes at Detective Lance. "That would be a tremendous mistake, one I guarantee you won't have the chance to fix."

Lance stares back at him, not believing a single word he says, but he doesn't argue the point. Oliver knows he saw the same things he did up there, the way Slade ripped through his men like tissue paper. Oliver's not sure if it's the weight of the moment coming down on all of them, or Sara resting her hand on Lance's arm, but either way, he switches gears.

"What about the Queen girl?" Lance asks, nodding his head to where Thea's still asleep on the floor of the helicopter.

"I'll get her back to her mother and brother," Oliver advises. "They'll look after her."

"Have them let me know when she's awake," Lance says. "I'm gonna need a statement."

Without waiting for a response, he turns away from them and the helicopter, heading towards the stairs that will take him down to the street. He's limping slightly, covered in sweat-laced dust, but he doesn't pause for a second. Oliver knows the policeman's going to be out there all night. He will do everything in his power to make this right, both as The Arrow and Oliver Queen, but he can't escape the feeling that he's failing the city all over again by not following Lance right now.

Sara grips Oliver's shoulder, her voice quiet as she says, "Thanks for saving him, Ollie."

"He's your dad," Oliver replies simply. "You should call Laurel, let her know you're both okay."

"Yeah," she says with a sad smile. "And he'll come around again. He's just hurting right now."

"He has every right to hate me," he says. "I don't blame him."

"No," Sara negates, shaking her head. "He's lashing out. There was no way you could have known about the bombs, or that he was bringing so many men up there." Oliver doesn't agree, and it's painfully obvious to both of them. Sara gives him a look, adding, "I know Felicity will get it through that thick skull of yours."

He lets out a choked laugh. She's not wrong, Felicity will definitely do her damnedest. He's surprised to discover it's all the more reason he wants to get back to her. Hearing it from Sara, trying to believe it himself, it's all different from hearing it from Felicity's lips.

Sara squeezes his arm once more, obviously pleased she got a reaction out of him, before turning.

"Hey, Sara?" She turns back with raised eyebrows. "Find out how they connected Isabel to Blood, and if they've already got him in custody. I don't want any loose ends."

"You got it," she agrees before turning to follow her father.

Oliver watches them go, making sure they make it through the door before he turns back to the helicopter. Lyla's already back on, slipping her headset in place as she checks Isabel's handcuffs. Her wrists and ankles are tightly secured, linked together by a long chain that's hooked to a steel ring in the roof of the helicopter. Her lips are pinched with displeasure, glaring at everyone and everything around

her. Usually he'd enjoy the hell out of that, but the sight of her only makes him tired. He just really wants to get Thea home, and get back to his family.

The whir of the helicopter blades starts up again as Oliver climbs on, shutting the door behind him.

He checks on his sister, making sure she's still securely fastened in one of the seats. Taking her hand in his, Oliver readjusts her head slightly before meeting Lyla's eyes. The understanding look they share says everything. They had contingency plan after contingency plan for getting Thea back, but nothing for this situation. Oliver hates flying blind nearly as much as Lyla does. She hands him his own headset and Oliver pulls his hood off, slipping it on, not for the first time thinking about the fact that he has no qualms about doing this around Lyla's men. He knows she'll make sure they keep his identity safe.

"We'll drop you and Thea off at the safe house with the others before I bring Isabel in," Lyla informs him, her voice laced with static as the chopper rises into the air.

"You think Waller will hold her?" Oliver asks warily.

"I think…" Lyla starts, her tone grim. "I think she'll see Isabel as a tool to get Slade back. And she's *going* to want Slade back. But more than that, she's going to hold her responsible for those explosives."

There's a darkness to her tone that clues Oliver in to the fact that there's a whole lot more going on than she's saying and it doesn't take much for him to figure out what it is.

"How many did you lose?" he asks her.

"At least three," Lyla replies. He bows his head in acknowledgement. She looks outside as they fly closer to the rubble and Oliver follows her gaze. It's just as impactful as it was the first time, maybe even more now that the wind has shifted, giving the illusion of smoke clearing. The block is surrounded by fire trucks, ambulances and police cars, and the crowd of people is near-suffocating. Lyla's voice is calm, a clear indicator that she's been involved in situations just like this multiple times, as she continues, "ARGUS will be coming in for cleanup and containment any moment." She smiles wryly. "And I have a debrief as soon as I get back."

Oliver knows very well how debriefs with Waller usually go. They are less than pleasant.

"Did she know?" he asks. Lyla doesn't answer immediately and he wonders for a second if maybe he wasn't clear enough. "Did she know you were releasing Slade? That you'd taken a team of men?"

She doesn't meet his eyes, her eyes still on the ruins of QC as they start heading away from the city's business district. That in itself is answer enough.

Lyla meets his eyes again. "Let me worry about Waller."

"*Lyla*," he cautions grimly.

"It's fine, Oliver," she dismisses.

"If you need us…" he begins. "If you need cover…"

"Then what?" Lyla asks with a trace of amusement in her voice. "You'll tell her you put an arrow to my head and made me release Slade?" He gives her a sullen look and she smiles, with gratitude. "I'm a big girl, Oliver. I can take responsibility for my decisions."

"I know that," Oliver says. "But you did this as a part of our team. *For* our team. You're not in it alone and we're not about to hang you out to dry."

His insistence, more than the sentiment, seems to be what surprises her. Whatever it is that gets through to her, though, he's glad for it because the restrained smile on her face reaches her eyes and it's vital to Oliver that she knows she's a member of their team. She's put everything on the line for them, *everything*, including guarding Ellie and Felicity even while she's answering to Waller and fighting morning sickness. She's owed his loyalty.

"You're a good man, Oliver Queen," she tells him. "Don't let Lance tell you otherwise."

With a self-deprecating smile, he says, "I'll keep that in mind." It's the closest he can come to agreeing with her. "How far out are we?"

"Five minutes, give or take," Lyla responds, glancing at her watch. "We're landing a ways away. I don't want to expose the location by landing the helicopter there. You'll have a car ride to the safe house afterwards. I have an ARGUS agent coming to get you and Thea."

He nods his agreement. He has no idea where the safe house is, not yet anyway, but he can only imagine the attention a helicopter would

get anywhere they went. Still, he's incredibly anxious to get back to Felicity and Ellie. He hasn't deluded himself into thinking Slade's dead - they aren't that lucky, not by any means - and regardless of where the safe house is and how secure it is, he won't be comfortable until he has his girls in his arms. The thin line of empty white space over the comms tells him that Felicity may have shut off her end, but she isn't disconnected completely - she's still listening in, making sure he's okay just as much as he wants to make sure she's okay.

"My lawyers will have a field day with this," Isabel says, pulling him from his thoughts. Oliver and Lyla don't move, but they both look at the other woman. "I'm pretty sure this is what they call unlawful imprisonment."

Oliver only has enough energy to snort. "That's hilarious coming from you," he replies.

"You won't get away with this," Isabel says, ignoring him before looking at Lyla. "Either of you. The second we land, I'm calling my attorneys. Whatever's being charged lacks merit, I'm sure. I'll be out within the hour."

Lyla's face is impassive as she tilts her head, staring at her like she's looking at an especially tiny bug under a microscope - annoying and petty, but nothing that concerns her.

"You say that like there will be formal charges," Lyla says. "Like there will be a trial. There won't be. Don't confuse ARGUS with the SCPD, Ms. Rochev. You are not innocent until proven guilty, and there's no time off for good behavior."

Isabel's nostrils flare with anger as she stares Lyla down. Lyla doesn't budge, merely smiling.

"You can't do this," Isabel says.

"I'm pretty sure we already did," Lyla says. "I don't need evidence to take you in, but it does help. Kidnapping Thea Queen, bartering an innocent life for the release of Slade Wilson, blowing up Queen Consolidated. You made this easy for us."

Isabel's jaw clenches, her face souring. She shifts, yanking slightly on her handcuffs, but she's tightly secured. She's going nowhere. She switches tactics, turning her attention back to Oliver.

"If you think you can hide from Slade, you're even stupider than I'd

thought." Isabel smiles; he's sure it's supposed to be chilling, but it's obviously forced. She's grasping at straws. "He's going to *destroy* you and everything you love." With a sneer in Lyla's direction, she adds, "And he's going to free me to help him."

Oliver can only stare at her. She's desperate - it's clear she'd banked on everything working in her favor, something that would almost be admirable except for the blatant faults in it. All her plans have crumbled, quite literally, right in front of her and she's bound for a top secret government agency that will probably never let her see the light of day again. She's reaching for hope and if he were a slightly better person he might feel a little sad for her, because it's all so futile.

But he doesn't.

Oliver sits up, careful not to jostle Thea too much before he stands. Years of learning how to maneuver and control his body lets him naturally adjust to the sway of the helicopter as he moves towards her, stopping just outside her reach.

"You thought Slade could control your men, right?" Oliver asks, lowering himself to Isabel's eye-level. "Your plan was broken from the start. Slade can't control them. He can't even control himself. You put your faith in a madman and while I have no doubt he'll come for me, I also have no doubt that he will never, *ever* come for you."

Rage darkens her eyes, her face flushing with a furious anger - and it's all because she knows he's right. With a tiny snarl, she yanks on the tight chains holding her before suddenly grabbing for him. She comes up short and he doesn't even flinch. It's more than a little satisfying.

"I saved him more times than you," Oliver continues. "I fought with him, trained with him, *killed* for him. We were allies once, and look what that brought me. The only thing Slade is loyal to is vengeance and a twisted version of Shado that haunts his memory. You're nothing to him, Isabel. And you never will be."

She can't do much more than curse at him with formidable rage, and she does it with gusto. Maybe it's a little petulant - it's definitely more than a bit vindictive - but something in Oliver relishes seeing her brought down so low.

He just smirks at her.

A sudden drop in gravity has Oliver's stomach swooping as the helicopter starts descending.

"We're here," Lyla announces. She stands, holding onto a handle in the ceiling as the vehicle drops. "I'll be in touch after I've met with Waller."

Oliver turns away from Isabel without a second thought, looking back to his sister. He quickly unhooks her restraints, catching her when her dead weight falls against him.

"Here," he says before pulling his headset off. Lyla's already there, taking it from him. He hooks his bow across his back before picking Thea up again. She's nearly weightless, so tiny and frail. God, he can't wait for her to wake up, to hear her voice sass him and to call him out for worrying so much about her, to explain Ellie and watch his sister and his daughter bond, to earn her forgiveness… To get his sister back. Staring at her sleeping face for a moment, Oliver cradles her close, readjusting her so her head rests against his chest. He sends out a mental prayer that she'll be okay, that everything will be okay. Because it has to be. With a soft sigh under his breath, Oliver turns back to Lyla. He nods, giving her a quiet, "Thank you."

"That's what family's for, Oliver," she replies.

Oliver pauses at that. Lyla slides the door open for him, looking back with a knowing smile, very aware of the meaningful impact of her words.

So of course Isabel chooses that moment to speak.

"Sleep with one eye open, Oliver," she advises. "He's going to make you pay."

"Maybe," Oliver agrees. "But you won't be around to see it. Goodbye, Isabel."

"Rot in hell," she hisses as he steps off the helicopter.

Oliver huffs a small laugh as he looks back at her where she's huddled - she looks so small all of a sudden, attempting to sit up tall but failing. She's terrified, despite the vindictive look in her eyes. She's so cold, so *lost* and hopeless.

She deserves it entirely.

"You first," he counters just as the door slides shut.

It shouldn't feel as good as it does, putting Isabel in her place, but *wow*

does it ever. She's been a festering splinter in his side all year and he's finally rid of her. It's such a relief that it almost feels like he can stop and breathe in spite of the fact that Zoom's still out there, that Slade's on the loose. They've at least checked Isabel off the threat list and - per a text from Laurel - Blood's in police custody as well.

So that just leaves Zoom and Slade. It's still daunting, but this tiny accomplishment somehow makes it feel more manageable, and that's more than he could ever ask for.

Detection systems are in place for Zoom, both at the house and portable ones, and Slade's blind, friendless, probably injured and possibly - *hopefully* - affected by Cisco's attempt at a cure.

It's okay. They'll be okay, he tells himself as the helicopter lifts off again. Oliver steps back, squinting as the blades brush up a tiny tornado of dirt, grass and leaves. He glances around quickly, taking in his surroundings - he's in a field, surrounded by nothing but empty black space. He catches Lyla offering him a wave, which he responds to with a nod, just as a car pulls up.

Oliver looks back and frowns when he sees Frank stepping out. Frank - his family-driver-of-more-than-a-decade Frank - has come to pick them up… after Lyla just told him an ARGUS agent was coming.

He doesn't quite know what to do with this.

"I'm told you require a ride, sir," the other man says, rounding the town car to open the back door. "Do you need any assistance with Miss Queen?"

Oliver doesn't budge. "You're…" he starts cautiously.

"A rather long-term covert agent," Frank finishes. "I apologize for the deception, Mr. Queen. ARGUS's interests are quite varied and their interest in your parents' business predates your time away by quite a bit." This in no way makes the situation less jarring. "If you'll allow me, I'll drive you and your sister to the safe house and reunite you with your wife and daughter."

Not only is Frank an ARGUS agent, but he's also well aware that Felicity is not his wife. Oliver's keenly aware that this is a way to remind him of what he wants in this moment, and that a discussion of this magnitude can actually wait. His interests lie elsewhere, and Frank knows it. And damn it if it doesn't work.

Frank waits patiently, holding the door open. His face remains calm and open. He's the driver who's been in his family's employ for years… but he's not.

And now really isn't the time to dive into that can of worms.

Still, Oliver moves cautiously, even though his gut tells him he doesn't have to. He trusts this man, despite the obvious long-term lie.

Oliver leans into the car, taking extra care with Thea. He places her gently in the middle of the seat before taking off his bow and quiver and scooting in next to her. Once he's settled, he looks back out at the driver with an appraising eye. It doesn't escape Frank's attention that Oliver has his hand up, keeping the door open for the moment.

"I think we should have a chat later, Frank," Oliver decides aloud.

Frank smiles with a nod. "Of course, sir. But for the time being, we should get moving." He glances up at the sky, blatantly leaving himself open for attack, if Oliver so wished. It's another jarring move, and this one works, too. "The helicopter is useful, sir, but not particularly subtle."

With a short nod in agreement, Oliver pulls back and Frank shuts the door. He quickly rounds the front of the car, but by the time he reaches the driver side door again, he's no longer Oliver's concern. All of his attention is back on Thea. She's slumped at an awkward angle, caving in on herself against the seat. Oliver frowns, moving to wrap his arm around her before seeing how dirty he is. His jacket's coated in dust, some parts of it charred and blackened. As Frank starts the car, Oliver whips his jacket off, tossing it on the floor along with his mask. His t-shirt is significantly cleaner and despite how dirty she is herself, he now feels better wrapping his arm around her, pulling her into the crook of his shoulder.

The steady rise of her shoulders as she breathes settles him some and he holds her closer, as if his arms alone can offer her protection.

He wishes he could do more. He wishes he'd done more, and not just for Thea.

"Is Roy there already?" he wonders aloud.

"Mr. Harper is receiving medical attention at the safe house as we speak," Frank informs him. "He's certainly worse for wear after his experience. It will take quite some time for his recovery, but he will

survive. Your Mr. Ramon and Doctor Snow are tending to him now, monitoring what the attempt at a mirakuru cure is doing to his body."

Oliver blinks because oh *wow*, is it weird having this conversation with Frank.

"Have they, uh… have they made any progress?" he asks. The memory of the rooftop of QC eradicates the confusion Frank's new position has in his mind, and his voice darkens as he adds, "It clearly didn't work as expected with Slade."

"You'd have to ask Mr. Ramon and Doctor Snow." Frank smiles in the rearview mirror. "I'm just the driver."

"Sure you are," Oliver replies dryly, not believing him a bit. But he lets it slide. Looking out the window, he notes that they've taken a side road and are quickly headed towards a freeway, one he doesn't immediately recognize. It's a testament to either his exhaustion or his trust in Frank that that knowledge doesn't freak him out. "How far out are we?"

"Less than ten minutes," the driver replies. He glances back at Oliver again, and his eyes are warm. "Tend to your sister, sir. I'll have you back to the rest of your family before you know it."

Despite his wariness, Oliver finds himself offering a tight smile back. "Thanks, Frank."

"Of course, sir."

He'd felt it earlier, the relief at having her back, but now that things are quiet, now that he can fully take stock of what had happened, of what he'd gotten back, it hits him even harder. Oliver drops a kiss to the top of his sister's head, brushing away bits of ashy debris that's stuck to her skin and clothes. She's wearing the same thing she had been the day she'd disappeared. It looks like it's been washed more than once, but her hair is matted, her skin sallow, like she was kept somewhere dark, away from the sun. And maybe she was. He thinks back to finding her sunglasses in that warehouse and Isabel's bold claim about having kept Thea and Roy in Queen Consolidated this entire time - had those been planted then? Had she been right there all along?

Oliver pinches his eyes shut, pressing a soft kiss to her hair. He breathes her in - she smells like smoke and cheap acrid soap - and vows silently that this will never happen to her again. He will never

let her be taken, never fail her, not ever.

He half expects her to stir, but she doesn't. She's perfectly still, save for her steady breathing. Oliver wishes desperately that he could wake her up. Memories take him back to before the island, when he'd tickled her awake - much to her annoyance - or taunted her with the smell of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls kept just outside her reach. He's always adored his little sister, even when he was a jerk about how he showed it. But now… Now he'll do better. He knows now how to be a good brother, how to be a good partner and father and son. It's a constant learning process, he's discovering, but it's one he's more than ready to take on. He's not done improving, but he's on the right path and Thea - as much as anyone - is due the best of him.

"I'm sorry," Oliver whispers against her temple. "I'm here. You're safe, Speedy, and I love you. I promise nothing like this will ever happen to you again. I've got you, okay? You're safe."

A flash of light distracts him momentarily. Oliver opens his eyes, looking around. They're off the freeway and are now in a neighborhood, an area with street lights. Raising his eyebrows in curiosity, he holds Thea closer as he cranes his neck to look over her head and out the window.

Wherever he'd thought the ARGUS safe house would be - a warehouse somewhere maybe, or a dingy apartment, or an underground bunker - this isn't it. His memories of working for them are full of places with more rats than rosebushes and more automatic weapons than Accords. This is something else entirely.

This is *suburbia*.

"Where are we?" he asks, his brow furrowing as they go deeper into the housing development. They're passing house after house with perfectly manicured lawns, decorative ornaments and windows filled with warm, bright lights. There are bicycles on porches and people walking dogs.

"Ivy Town, sir," the driver replies as he turns onto a side street that looks much the same as the last. If Oliver had been driving in here for the first time, he would've gotten lost.

It's strangely fascinating. His life has been a series of extremes from the very beginning - he'd grown up in a castle-like home and come of age on a not-quite-deserted island. He's always known that for some people life is like this: *suburbia*. It's the stuff of television, stuff he's

seen hundreds of times, stuff that's idolized by people looking for the right person to marry and settle down with the two point five kids and a white picket fence… but it's foreign to him. And he finds himself soaking it all up with a sense of wonder that would probably be a bit ridiculous to anyone else.

The car finally rolls to a stop. Frank's out and around before Oliver can take in his surroundings, opening the door for him and Thea.

Oliver gathers his sister into his arms and when the driver-slash-ARGUS-agent offers to take her from him, Oliver just shakes his head. He isn't ready to let her go, not yet. When Oliver stands up again, he finally feels the remnants of the explosion, radiating through him like his body is one giant walking bruise, but he still doesn't let her go. She's light, waiflike in his arms; it's no burden, especially considering how much lighter his heart feels for his ability to protect her.

The brick driveway is oddly smooth. The sprawling ranch house is set on a cul-de-sac, well-lit and surrounded by large, mature trees. The neighbors across the street have a pair of tricycles still on their lawn and their front door is open, giving him a view of their house through their screendoor. He can smell a barbeque somewhere nearby. There are windows open everywhere with curtains that flutter in the light breeze and laughter echoes down the street.

It's peaceful, happy in a way he's never quite known. It sort of takes his breath away.

"*Daddy!* Momma, Daddy's here!"

He'd know Ellie's voice anywhere - it's ingrained in him at this point - and he instantly spins towards the house Frank had parked in front of. The second he sees her, a grin splits his face. His daughter's waving excitedly from the front window, her hair up in a high, completely lopsided ponytail that swings with her movements.

The door swinging open catches his attention next.

Felicity runs down the front steps, not pausing for anything until she reaches him. The second she does she wraps herself around him, as much as she can. It doesn't matter that he's still holding Thea or that he's filthy from the building coming down or that they're out in public or *anything* - they're both here, and they're both alive.

It feels like he's stepped into his own daydream.

"Oh thank God," Felicity breathes out against his shoulder. It's awkward, the way his sister is more-or-less pinned between them, but Oliver wouldn't have it any other way. That's doubly true when Ellie dashes out the open front door and wraps her arms around his leg, too.

"I'm okay," he whispers.

Felicity pulls back to look at him. Her eyes dart over every bit of him she can reach. They rest on Thea for a second before darting back to his face. She pushes up onto her toes, cupping his face, and he bends closer, knowing without needing to be told what she needs. The kiss is simple, it has to be, but it's a reassurance that they both desperately need. He feels her desire to linger, and it matches his one hundred percent, but now is so not the time.

When she pulls back, worry is still evident on her face.

"I'm okay," Oliver stresses. "I promise."

"I know, I know," she replies in a rush, shaking her head. She caresses his face, like she's really making sure what she's seeing and feeling is real. "I just…"

"I know." He nods, his head falling forward, needing to lean on her, but the angle is uncomfortable with Thea in his arms. "Come on, let's get inside." She doesn't let him go for a second, and he knows exactly how she feels… but when he whispers, "I know, honey," she finally relents.

With a quick nod, she says, "Let's go back in, Ellie." Felicity clears the tears from her throat and leans down to pull her away. "Now that Daddy's here, we gotta get you ready for bed, little girl."

A frown is quick to fix itself to Ellie's face at that, but it's gone in the blink of an eye when their daughter looks up.

"Aunt Thea!" Ellie squeals delightedly. "Aunt Thea's here!" She's bouncing on her toes with so much energy that Oliver has to wonder how many people have snuck her sugar this evening. It's going to be near impossible to get her to sleep. When Thea doesn't respond though, Ellie tilts her head, worry incredibly reminiscent of Felicity coloring her little face. "Is she napping? Uncle Roy's sleepy, too."

"How about we go inside first, okay, Ellie-bug?" he asks, readjusting his grip on his sister.

"Okay," she replies simply.

Felicity scoops Ellie up, balancing the toddler on her hip before one of her hands returns to his shoulder. It's like she has to touch him, needs to reassure herself that in spite of an actual building nearly exploding under his feet he's here, he's whole.

Given the way he can't stomach the idea of letting Thea go just yet, it's a feeling he fully understands.

"Daddy," Ellie says, leaning closer, lowering her voice to what she probably thinks is a whisper. "You still have Green Arrow pants on."

She's not wrong, and he hadn't even thought to grab his gear from the car. If he was being perfectly honest, the idea of the neighbors seeing The Arrow walking into a suburban house hadn't even crossed his mind. Really, the idea that the safe house was in a suburban neighborhood called Ivy Town hadn't even been a possibility. He's glad he'd taken some of it off; he very well could have gotten out of that car in more than just his green leather pants and oh, what fun that would have been.

"I do, don't I?" Oliver asks her with a little smile. She nods gravely and he tilts his head towards the front door. "Let's get Thea taken care of and then I'll change, okay?"

Ellie nods, obviously approving of his decision to follow her sage advice. "That's a good plan, Daddy."

He glances back toward Frank, but the other man is already saying with a small proud smile, "I'll have your things brought to your room, sir."

With a grateful nod - really, the more time that passes between Frank's little revelation and the present is making it a little too easy to forgive and forget - he heads into the picturesque little world of domesticity that stands before them.

As he walks into the cozy living room, the front door falling shut with a soft snick behind them, it's oddly perfect.

He hears Digg and Cisco rattling around in the kitchen, instantly notices half-finished drawings scrawled in crayon on the coffee table, and Felicity's tablet tossed onto the nearby sofa. There are jackets on the coat rack already, an empty glass on a dining room table he spies when he cranes his neck. Like so many other things he's discovered

since Ellie showed up in their lives, it feels like everything he never knew he needed in his life. Wanted, yes, most definitely, in some deep dark recess of himself that he'd never let see the light of day, but needed? Oh yes, he needs this. He needs this future. And it's right here, it's right within his reach.

A quick stutter of steps coming from the kitchen area prefaces a sharp gasp.

Moira freezes, her hand flying to cover her mouth in shock as she takes them both in, and then she's rushing towards them with an agonized, "Oh, *my baby*." She's in front of him in an instant, her hands running over Thea's face. Her fingers are shaking, her eyes glassy with unshed tears as she brushes the dust from her daughter's slack features. There's so much anguish in those simple movements that it's physically hard for Oliver to watch. Felicity squeezes his shoulder, lending him her support as much as sharing his grief. He wants to look at her, but he can't look away from his mother and sister, not yet. Moira's breathing is uneven, coming out in short gasps as she cups Thea's cheek, biting her lips together, trying to contain the emotions welling up inside her.

The sight of mother and daughter being reunited brings back the rest of the night. It's a reminder of what they gained… but also what they lost.

"Mom," he whispers. Moira doesn't respond; she only has eyes for Thea. "The building…"

"I know," Moira replies, her voice cracking. She nods a little too rapidly. "We have a plan in place, rescue crews and I've already instructed campaign funds be reallocated, and we're figuring out who was still in the building… but…" She takes an uneasy breath. "Let's take one thing at a time, shall we? That'll be for tomorrow. Tonight…" She finally meets his gaze. "Tonight I just want to be with my daughter."

It's a sentiment he understands perfectly, and one that has him glancing at his own little family. Ellie's watching Thea with worried eyes, her head nestled in the crook of Felicity's neck, her fingers playing with her mother's necklace. Felicity instantly meets his gaze, giving him a smile that's equal parts support, worry, understanding, and *love*.

Diggle and Cisco wander into the room behind her, the latter

munching on a strip of beef jerky while the former stands with folded arms, his face subdued with quiet compassion.

"Before you say anything," Cisco says, shattering the quiet moment. He holds up a piece of jerky for emphasis, seemingly oblivious to the emotional tension in the room. "I think I know what went wrong. And I fixed it. Probably."

"We'll talk about that in a moment," Oliver replies tightly. "First, is there a spare room I can put Thea in? Frank said Dr. Snow is here to help? Thea needs medical attention."

Moira's eyes fly up to his, panic lacing her voice. "Is she okay?"

"We don't know what happened to her," he reminds her gently. "At best she's dehydrated and undernourished. And drugged, but we don't know with what. She needs a doctor and with Slade on the loose, a hospital isn't exactly an option."

"Come on," Diggle says, nodding towards a hallway off to Oliver's right. "We'll put her with Roy. It'll be easier for Dr. Snow to keep an eye on both of them at once."

As much as the thought of putting his sister in bed with a boy - any boy, even with both of them unconscious - makes him frown, he realizes it's also smart. With a silent nod, he follows Diggle, Moira close behind him.

"I wanna go with Aunt Thea," he hears Ellie say.

"How about we see her in the morning, okay, sweetie?" Felicity replies. "She's sleeping, remember?"

"But I wanna go with her," Ellie replies, her voice rising slightly, a very specific pitch that Oliver has learned the hard way. "I wanna go with Daddy."

He barely catches Felicity's sigh - she gets it, Oliver realizes, she understands Ellie's need to be near him because she's feeling it herself, just as much as he's feeling it with them, too - before she says, "Okay, but just for a minute, alright?"

"Okay."

The house seems small in comparison to the Manor, but then most places do. Still, it has to have at least four bedrooms, considering the

size of it. It'll be a tight squeeze for the team - especially with Dr. Snow and Cisco and Frank joining them - but it will suit their needs for now. It's not forever; it's just until they get Slade. Which will be sooner rather than later, if Oliver has anything to say about it.

The room they've put Roy in is clearly meant as a kid's room. There's a Jack-and-Jill bath, and with all the doors open, Oliver can see into another room connected through the bathroom. It's obviously meant for kids as well. There are two twin beds in that one, where Cisco and Dr. Snow have settled their things. That's probably smart - the bathroom counter is covered in medical supplies, all laid out, organized for easy access.

But the most striking thing about the room is its occupant.

Roy is positively gaunt, ashen to a worrying degree, and Oliver immediately knows his survival is more touch-and-go than he'd been led to believe. Guilt swamps him, unexpected and staggering in its intensity - he did this. His choices, his decisions, led to this.

Oliver suddenly feels a whole lot better about lying his sister down next to his team member. As he sets her down next to Roy, the spike of regret that joins his guilt is daunting. He should never have driven them apart in the first place. He should have been there for Roy, should have seen what was happening with him, should have done so many things… but looking back does little good. The past is done and it's right now that matters.

That thought does little to assuage the guilt though.

Oliver doesn't go far, unwilling to let Thea's hand go. Moira's of the same mind, kneeling next to the bed next to Thea's head.

"Oh!" A willowy brunette pauses at the entrance to the bathroom, a clean cloth in her hands where she's meticulously drying them. "You're here. Hi. I'm Dr. Snow. Caitlin, if you'd prefer. Um…" With a quick gesture, she turns to grab a bag from the bathroom. "If you all don't mind stepping back, I'll take a look."

Instinct has Oliver holding Thea tighter. If there's one thing his experience has taught him it's that new people are dangerous, no matter how good their intentions are. And it certainly doesn't help that the last time he'd let his sister out of his sight, she'd disappeared into thin air. But Dr. Snow - *Caitlin* - is here, and she's already treating Roy…

Despite that, Oliver glances back at Felicity. She nods subtly, and that's all he needs.

With a quiet hum of agreement, he relinquishes his hold on her hand and steps back. The second he reaches Felicity's side, her hand grips his, their fingers twining together tightly. Somehow everything seems more solid, by virtue of her presence alone.

"How long has she been out?" Caitlin asks, draping a stethoscope around her neck before picking up Thea's wrist to check her pulse.

"I don't know," Oliver replies.

"What was she dosed with?" Caitlin continues, glancing at her watch, keeping her fingers pressed firmly to Thea's wrist.

Oliver grits his teeth, hating the taste of the words as he repeats, "I don't know." They're slightly harsher this time, but he can't help it. He's done what he can to save his sister, but she still has a long ways to go. And knowing he can't be the one to carry her through this part feels like a knife to his lungs.

His mother hasn't moved, he notices absently. She merely presses herself out of the way, forcing Caitlin to move around her, not that the doctor seems to mind. She understands, and for that at least, Oliver's grateful. Moira strokes her daughter's brow with quiet, motherly affection that makes Thea seem even smaller, even younger.

He's so distracted by the sight that it takes him a moment to realize Caitlin is watching him appraisingly.

"Okay," she suddenly announces, her voice both kind but also closed off, clinical. "I'm going to need some room to work. There's too many people in here."

His immediate gut reaction is: *no.*

"I'm not leaving," Moira says instantly, beating him to the punch. She moves to sit on the bed before anyone can argue. She runs her fingers through Thea's hair, smoothing it back off her forehead.

Oliver glances around, realizing that Caitlin is right. The room is remarkably tiny-looking with so many bodies in it. And as the young woman starts moving around, gathering more supplies for Thea, he knows it's time to leave.

Still…

"Is it safe?" Oliver asks. Caitlin's eyebrows shoot up at that. "I mean, with Roy. With leaving her next to him. We know he's dosed with mirakuru, and the cure didn't work on Slade. What if he wakes up and…?"

"He's being kept under heavy sedation until we know if Cisco's new formula works," Caitlin tells him. She brings over a thin-looking rack that she hangs a saline bag on next to Thea before grabbing an alcohol wipe. She pulls Thea's sleeve up, cleaning away the dirt on her arm. She looks as nonchalant as she sounds, which is a little more reassuring. "I'm monitoring his vitals very, very closely. We should have a better idea by morning how the cure is interacting with his system, but he won't wake up until we're ready for him to." She glances back at him with a small smile. "I promise."

Oliver knows she means it, but the idea of leaving her here still makes his stomach feel hollow. There's a hundred other things he should be focusing on other than his sister being so completely helpless, but he can't help it. It doesn't matter that she's in a safe place and surrounded by people who are more than capable of taking care of her, he doesn't want to leave. Not yet.

It's a notion that's made even more unbearable when Ellie suddenly slithers out of her mother's arms and crawls up over the foot of the bed. Felicity's, "Wait," is echoed by Oliver's strained, "Ellie, baby…" as their daughter scurries up the mattress and under Thea's limp arm.

"I'm staying with Aunt Thea, too," she asserts, wriggling herself right up against her aunt's side, her face twisted with consternation. "She needs me. Hugs help everybody. Remember, Daddy? It's good medicine. Doctor Caitlin always says so."

"I do, do I?" the doctor asks with clear amusement in her tone. "Well, that is *true*, but first I need to examine her, to make sure she's ready for medicine. Let's save your medicine for a bit later, okay?"

That is the opposite of what she wants to hear. A pout sours her little face. It's not meant to be funny, but it is, and Oliver has to press his lips together to keep his smile at bay. Her petulant frown is all lower lip and pinched eyebrows and it really shouldn't be half as cute as it is, but he is a sucker for that little face. He thinks he probably always will be.

Squeezing Felicity's hand tightly, he lets her go and moves to collect

his daughter. "How about first thing in the morning, we check in on her and you can give her hugs then, okay?" he offers.

"No," Ellie replies with way more demand than he'd expected. She pulls Thea's arm around her like it's a seatbelt meant to keep her in place.

Oliver sighs, his amusement with her quickly draining. "Ellie…"

"*No*!"

His shoulders fall. It's late, way past her usual bedtime, and it's obvious the fumes she'd been running on are quickly expiring. He'd seen the signs outside and in the living room. She's overtired and has had an incredibly emotional day - so has he, for that matter - and even as a relatively new parent of an exceptionally great child, he can see the temper tantrum mounting. He just also doesn't have the experience to know quite how to deal with it, mostly because he still feels the urge to give in, especially because it's clear she's missed her aunt.

"Ellie," he starts again, but the little girl just burrows deeper into Thea's chest. He's about to pick her up, come hell or high water, when Caitlin kneels next to the bed, just enough so she's eye level with the toddler.

"Did you know it's important to have the right treatment at the right time?" she asks.

Ellie narrows her eyes at the young woman. She's not fooled; she knows this is a trap, probably because she recognizes the doctor's genial tone, but she obviously can't figure out how to avoid it either.

After a beat, she replies, "Yeah."

"Good," Caitlin tells her. "Then you know what it means when I tell you that we aren't ready for hug treatments yet. What your aunt needs right now is rest. And I need to run some tests on her. But I think we *might* be ready for the hug stage tomorrow."

Her little face crumbles. Her eyes fill with tears, her lower lip trembling as she says, "But I haven't seen her in *a hundred years*! And she needs hugs! Hugs make everything better! She needs hugs 'cause she got so mad last time." And then, in a quiet whisper as the tears spill over, she adds, "I don't want Aunt Thea mad at me anymore."

That thoroughly guts him.

"Oh, *Ellie*." Felicity steps around him and scoops her up off the bed. "She's not mad at you, sweetheart. She's not. I promise."

But Ellie isn't listening. She shakes her head violently, her cheeks red and her nose runny as her springy blonde curls bounce around her face. "She doesn't like me anymore," Ellie insists through barely-intelligible sobs.

Oliver feels like his heart has been ripped right out of his chest and crushed in front of him. The kind of pain that's branded itself on his beautiful little girl's face is something he never, *ever* wanted for her. Not once. And something inside him dies a bit as he realizes that she's gotten this from him, that his penchant for self-blame is something he passes along to his daughter.

"She loves you," Oliver counters, wrapping himself around both of them. Felicity's shoulders are shaking a little, and he knows if he looks at her he'd see her own tears in response to Ellie's. He cups the back of her neck with one hand, his thumb brushing over her hairline while the other rubs over Ellie's back. "She was never mad at you, baby. She was confused and a little angry at me and Mommy, but none of this is your fault. Okay?"

Ellie just shakes her head again, not believing him, still a mess of tears and strain. But she does reach for him and he instantly responds. She wraps her arms around his neck, burying her crying face in his shoulder. She shakes against him, little gulps of air puffing through her lips as she cries.

He wants to make this better, wants to *fix* it, but there's nothing he can do to ease the ache in his daughter's heart other than this, other than being the rock she can rely on, the arms that comfort her. It doesn't matter that he just narrowly escaped with his life earlier, or that there is another mass murderer on the loose. Nothing matters but this moment. Oliver cups the back of her head and makes hushing noises as Felicity strokes the little girl's back. Her eyes are red where they watch Ellie, and he wants to wrap them both up, protect them from *everything* - from Slade and Zoom, and from emotional gut punches like this one. It's not realistic, and he knows that, but he doesn't care.

By the time Ellie finally stops shaking, his shirt is thoroughly stained with snot and tears. It's only when her breathing evens out and her

head grows heavier that Oliver realizes she's cried herself to sleep.

A heavy sigh punctuates the air and Oliver glances up to see his mother watching him with sympathetic eyes. Her hand is still drifting through Thea's matted hair, just as his is tangled in Ellie's curls. It's still strange, finding this common ground with his mother, but even absent any words it feels like they've reached a level of understanding he'd never expected to find with her.

"You should get her to bed," Digg offers up quietly from the doorway, reminding Oliver of the other man's presence. "Frank and I will keep an eye on the security system for a bit. They've got a hell of a set-up in the basement. We've got it covered. Go get cleaned up, get some rest. Take a breather."

"It hasn't exactly been easy for you either," Oliver points out. He might have been accepting of Frank's presence on the drive over, but he's not exactly ready for the notion that Frank - the family driver since he was about ten - is probably in the basement right now keeping watch over all of them.

"You kidding?" Digg scoffs. "I've been sitting in suburbia with my feet up sipping lemonade all day while you and Sara went up against Isabel, Slade *and* the SCPD. Pretty sure you got the short end of the stick, man."

He's oversimplifying things, obviously, but there's some truth to his words nonetheless. And the imagery brings a tired smile to Oliver's lips, something Diggle had obviously been aiming for.

"Okay," Oliver finally agrees. He hoists Ellie up a little higher so that her head rests on his shoulder more comfortably. "Okay, but just for a few hours. We need to regroup as soon as Lyla and Sara are back, figure out what to do about Slade, get more information from Cisco about what, if anything, his first cure actually did."

"Cisco's running some tests and ARGUS is on it," Digg reminds him. "Waller doesn't want him out any more than you do and she's pissed as hell that the chip is offline."

"Offline?" Oliver repeats, wariness edging his voice. "Is that why it didn't work? Does that mean the tracker isn't working?"

"She is adamant that there's no way that the chip wouldn't work," Diggle replies, his face growing grim. "She thinks he found it and dug it out of his own spine."

Oliver closes his eyes at that, whispering, "Damn it."

It's only in that moment that he realizes how much he'd been banking on that chip working, on using that to find Slade.

Without it, he's just gone.

"There's still the possibility that he was in the building," Diggle adds. "That he didn't survive."

"We both know that's not likely," Oliver says, unconsciously cradling Ellie closer.

"Yeah. Well… you can imagine this is all the more reason Waller's pissed as hell right now."

That's not comforting in the least. He'd been hoping to keep this off Waller's radar entirely, but given that she lost several men *and* Slade all in one fell swoop, that hope had most definitely been in vain.

"So you heard from Lyla?" Oliver asks.

"Briefly," he replies, and the tight line to Digg's smile says more than his lack of words does. "Just enough to hear about the chip. We'll know more when she gets back, but I don't think we should get too settled here. I'm not sure ARGUS is going to extend us the favor of letting us stay very long."

Oliver narrows his eyes. Digg's just as good at dodging as Lyla. "How much trouble is she in?"

"Don't worry about it," Digg replies offhandedly.

"John…" Oliver starts again.

"Pretty sure she's gonna end up a stay-at-home mom for a bit," Diggle interrupts. "It's okay, Oliver. We knew what we were getting into."

That's a small comfort. It bothers the hell out of him that they might have to pay a steep price for their part in helping save his sister. But there's also nothing he can do about it. Not right now. Maybe not ever. His pull with Waller isn't what it used to be.

"If you need *anything*…" Oliver begins again.

"We know you got our backs," Digg replies, talking over him. "That's not even a question. Now go find that girl a bed and take a shower.

No offense, man, but you need one."

Oliver's eyebrows raise at that, a move that Diggle mirrors in response. He's not buying the other man's flippant tone, but Digg's definitely cut through the tension that had been mounting, which had undoubtedly been his goal.

"Come on," Felicity says, laying a hand on his arm. "I'll show you where our room is."

He hesitates, glancing briefly at his sister and Roy before meeting his mother's eyes. He's relinquishing control of both the home's security and his sister's care. It's not easy in the least, but it's the right choice for the moment, and he knows it.

Moira nods, indicating she has Thea, just as much as Digg has the security.

Still, it's only when Felicity's hand drags down his arm and she interlaces her fingers with his that he nods, relinquishing control to the others.

They're both silent as she leads him back down the hall. He follows her, taking in their surroundings.

They pass two bedrooms - the doors are open, and while it's still tight, it's obvious everyone has found a place to sleep for the night, which makes him feel better. There's one bathroom in the hall that he can see, two linen closets, and a discreet entrance in the ceiling that must lead to the attic.

Felicity leads him to the bedroom at the end of the hall, to the wide double-doors opening into a spacious master suite. It's right in-line with the neighborhood appearances and looks nothing like a safe house. It's bright and airy. Ellie's shoes are behind the door and her doll is on a nearby chair. Felicity's laptop is on the bed and he can see through the open closet door that she's hung some of their clothes up for their short-term stay.

It feels like home. It feels like the future. The only thing missing is family photos, really.

"Let me get the computer out of the way," Felicity says, hurrying forward to grab her laptop and put it on the dresser instead.

Watching her move around the space like it's familiar - like it's *routine*

- takes his breath away. He hopes it always does. The way she fits into his life, the grace and ease she's taken to this role of mother and partner absolutely floors him whenever he stops to think about it. That alone might have been enough to make him fall in love with her, if he hadn't already been.

Felicity looks back just in time to catch him staring. She brushes some hair behind her ear as she asks, "What?"

"Nothing," Oliver replies with a smile. "You're beautiful. That's all."

The pleased flush that crawls across her cheeks makes it intensely clear to him that he needs to tell her this often. Not just because she obviously loves to hear it, but because he'll never tire of watching her skin turn pink as she bites her lip to hold in a smile.

She steps forward, rising up on her tiptoes to kiss him gently. It's soft, more affection than heat, but still somehow a balance of the two that's pure perfection. He craves this as much as he does the passion between them.

"You're not so bad yourself, you know," she whispers with a grin as they part, their noses brushing together.

Oliver hums under his breath. "Maybe after that shower. I'm literally covered in pieces of my family's legacy right now."

He means both the ash and dust from Queen Consolidated and the tears and runny nose courtesy of his daughter. When he strokes his hand down Ellie's spine and the toddler lets out a little contented sigh, it's very clear that Felicity understands what he's saying on every level.

"We'll put it back together, Oliver," she says softly. "We'll rebuild it all."

"I know," he agrees. And he does. His belief in *them* is staggering in its strength sometimes, especially when she's looking at him like that, her eyes darkening, trust and confidence and love shining back at him.

"For now though," she says, holding out her hands. "How about you hand her off to me. I'll get her to bed. You go clean up."

As he shifts Ellie into Felicity's arms, he whispers, "Thank you." Her answering smile is pure light and he can't resist one more kiss, one to Felicity and one on top of Ellie's head, before heading off to the

attached master bathroom.

He hears the soft rustle of sheets as Felicity pulls them back for Ellie, followed by the toddler mumbling something in a sleep-laden voice and Felicity making gentle shushing sounds. It pulls his attention for a moment and he nearly heads back out to help, but then he catches his reflection in the mirror.

"Wow," he breathes out.

He's still completely coated in bits of debris. His head and hands are the worst, but a lot had snuck into his jacket, blanketing him. Much of it has turned solid after being caked with sweat and Ellie's tears. He winces thinking about peeling off the leather pants with the state they're in right now, but there's no other option, so he gets to work. By the time he's stripped down, he wonders if it's even worth saving them.

Leaving them in a crumpled mess on the floor along with his boxers and t-shirt, he turns to the shower. The fate of his leather pants is a decision for another time. It's oddly comforting knowing he doesn't have to think about what to do with them now, which is ridiculous considering everything that's happened tonight alone. It's just easier to postpone, which is probably part of the appeal.

Oliver doesn't takes time to appreciate how huge the shower is - he barely notes the built-in bench, the towel rack along one wall lined with fluffy towels, or the presence of their shampoo and conditioner crowded in the caddy, Felicity's body wash and loofahs, Ellie's shampoo and an odd mixture of bath toys in some kind of mesh netting suction cupped to the corner of the slate-tiled walls. He's only intent on turning it on.

He sets the water temperature to slightly hotter than comfortable - years of nothing more than lukewarm ponds on the island that had the ability to drop down to ice cold has made him relish the luxury of a water heater.

When he steps in, the heat instantly melts away the aches he hadn't let himself feel. The blast from the building exploding had felt like a concussion bomb, and every inch of him was starting to reverberate with it. It wouldn't last, that was the good news, but he was definitely feeling it now. The water stings his hands, making him hiss and he looks down to see the metal rope he'd held Slade with had burned through his gloves, cutting through his palms slightly.

He grits his teeth against the pain.

The water is murky as it rinses off the worst of the debris.

Oliver moves to clean himself off, wanting to get back out to Felicity and Ellie, but the lull of the heat has him pausing. With a soft groan, he bows his head into the spray, letting his body finally *relax*.

He's had worse battles. Nothing's broken or punctured. He's not even that bruised, all things considered. It's just the abrasion on his hands, really, and that's a minor thing. But he's exhausted, as if so much more happened. Which it did. Lives were lost, battles were waged - some won, but the casualties tipped the scales completely.

Thinking about how many people were lost tonight has his stomach clenching painfully, acid churning in his gut.

It's worse because he's so damn grateful he survived.

Tears burn his eyes and Oliver inhales slowly, tilting his head back, letting the water hit his face and run through his hair. It washes away worst of the grime, but it's going to take far more than that to get rid of it completely… if that's even possible.

He's never felt this battle within himself before - it was easier, before Ellie arrived, because it was simple: he was here to save people, to risk everything in order for those around him to survive. He hadn't had anything to live for, save for the mission. But now, things are so different - *everything* is different, and he doesn't know how to handle this new brand of guilt. He's alive, but so many others aren't. It's not that he doesn't care, that's far from true, but he's also *happy*, happy that he got to come home to his family, to his Felicity, their daughter.

How is it right that he feels *happy* knowing he survived and others didn't? Other people who had no part in this war, who had no reason to lose their lives tonight, especially compared to him.

It's not right.

He failed this city again tonight, and not just by letting that damn building fall, letting God only knew how many fall with it, but because he's *grateful* it was them and not him. It'd been an easy decision at the time - he'd done what he could, he was so sure of it - but now, feeling the consequences of his actions… of his *heart*…

The shower's loud, but it's not *that* loud, which is why he's surprised

when a voice breaks through his thoughts.

"So, is the water that hot or are you steaming up the shower all on your own?"

It's absolutely amazing how her voice has the ability to eradicate everything but *her*.

Oliver wipes the water off his face and looks back to find Felicity's pulled open the frosted glass shower door. It's impossible not to smile when he sees her. Her glasses are missing, her hair is out of her usual tight ponytail, leaving it in loose waves falling down her back… and she looks incredibly amused with herself, if her grin is any indication. But it's the darkening of her eyes that has him pausing. She brazenly takes him in, her eyes trailing down his form. Just the feel of her stare is enough to make him start to harden, but it's the way she bites her lip and flushes that has him tightening with a surprisingly urgent arousal. It streaks through him, leaving a trail of burning need in its wake, which is only amplified by the hot water cascading down his chest.

Still, he can't let a line that bad go by without comment.

"That has got to be the worst pickup line I've ever heard," he says. Her eyes drift back up to his. "And I was Tommy Merlyn's wingman, so that's saying something."

Felicity shakes her head. "I disagree." She pulls her shirt up and over her head - oh *God*, she's not wearing a bra. She drops it carelessly behind her before tugging the zipper of her jeans down. Oliver's breath gets caught in his throat as he watches her every move. His fingers itch to do the work himself, but watching is oh so much better. She shimmies her hips, pushing her jeans and panties down, leaving her bare to his gaze. "If it were that bad, it wouldn't work. And I'm pretty sure it's working…" She steps in, closing the door behind her. "Don't you think?"

She pushes her arms around him, pressing her front to his back.

"Maybe," he manages.

She's so warm and soft, the perfect antithesis to everything hard and uneven in him. The power of his craving for her is frightening, but he doesn't turn away from it - he can't. He needs her, he needs this. He needs to know it's okay, that it's right…

Oliver takes an unsteady breath, forcing himself back to reality. "Ellie?"

"John's watching her," she replies breathily.

His brow furrows at that, the idea that his best friend is possibly right out there while she's in here *naked* with him making him pause. "Is he…?"

Felicity cuts him off with a soft humming noise before whispering, "The water's so hot."

He blinks, instantly moving as if she'd asked him to. "I'll turn it down…"

"No," she says, shaking her head against his shoulder. "It's okay."

Humming softly, she reaches around him and grabs her body wash. He watches her with hooded lids as she squeezes a healthy dollop into her palm before putting it back. The thought of what she's going to do with that makes him swallow hard, his body tightening with anticipation.

"C'mere," she whispers, wrapping herself around him from behind again.

She angles him away from the water slightly, just enough before splaying her hands over his stomach. His eyes slip shut, his hand flying out to the wall for support. Felicity runs her fingers over his muscles. She takes her times, letting them get amply sudsy before she starts moving further. One slides up his chest, curling her fingers in so her nails scrape over his nipples, while the other slides down.

Oliver chokes on his next breath, his head dropping forward as he leans back into her.

She wraps her hand around him.

"Felicity," he gasps, his shoulders falling, his hips jerking forward. She holds him tighter, twisting her wrist, sliding her soapy fingers down his length. The sensations are intense, rocketing through him, and he's sure it's because of the night they've had, but he doesn't care. He just lets them wash over him. It feels good, *so good*. As she drags her fingers back up, Oliver whimpers, and the second she hears him, Felicity picks up the pace.

She strokes him, pressing a series of soft kisses over his back. She squeezes, just right, making him shudder as her lips move over his shoulder blades. Some part of him remembers that he's still dirty, that he should clean off before letting her do that, but a larger part of him doesn't care. It feels so good, so perfect, and he gives in completely, needing to lose himself in her.

It's like she knows that, because she doesn't stop.

Oliver melts against her and she accepts every bit of it, holding him up as much as she can.

The combination of her behind him and the water at his front is intoxicating. Her other hand moves over his chest, wrapping around him tightly, hugging him close as she tugs on him. His free hand comes up, covering hers over his chest, his other curling in against the wall as he slips under her spell. Felicity squeezes the head of his erection, tightening her hold on him at the base when she goes back down. With each downward stroke, her fingers wander, slipping over his balls, making him sigh with pleasure. She works hims slowly, and he grows harder with each passing second, filling her little hand.

If she's aiming to distract him, or to make him forget even for one second, it's *working*…

But he needs more.

He needs *her*.

With a desperate sigh, Oliver's hand drops to cover hers, stilling her motions long enough to let the water rinse the soap away. He relishes the feel of both their fingers wrapped around his length; it's quietly intimate in a way that rocks him to his very foundations.

"Oliver," she moans, arching her back, pressing her breasts into him. She tries to move her hand again, but he stops her, squeezing his hand over hers. Oliver hisses through clenched teeth as it sends need burning through him and in the next second he's spinning to face her.

She barely gets the chance to whisper his name before his lips are on hers.

It's the exact opposite of the chaste kisses they'd been exchanging all night. This, *this* is the passion he knows they're capable of, the passion he needs *right now*; he needs it to burn through him, to reaffirm what he's feeling. She is the light to his darkness, she always has been, and

right now he needs that light like a drug.

Felicity opens for him and he takes complete advantage, slipping his tongue in to find hers. They both let go of his hard length, leaving it pressed up between them, slipping against their slick stomachs. She's so smooth, so perfect, and he needs her so badly. They wrap themselves around the other, holding on so hard it hurts.

It's not enough though. He needs to be *inside her*.

Oliver plunders her mouth, angling her head to go deeper, moving them so he can press her back against the wall. His muscles ache with exhaustion that has nothing to do with lack of rest and everything to do with the weight of what happened earlier, but that doesn't matter, not with her. He drops his hands down her slick curves, digging his fingers into her waist, ready to lift her up just high enough so he can thrust home…

But they don't make it.

Felicity pulls back, stopping everything with a gasped, "Wait, hang on. Hang on."

"Are you okay?" he replies breathlessly, pulling back to look at her. Her eyes are closed, her head lolling back, looking like she's in the complete opposite of pain with her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. He cups her face. "Felicity, did I…?"

He was moving too fast, being too aggressive.

Oliver lets out a harsh breath.

Felicity shakes her head, her brow furrowing like what he'd just asked was the most ludicrous thing in the world. She wipes her face, smearing some of her makeup as she looks up at him.

"I'm perfect," she replies, cupping his cheek. "You're here, so naturally things are pretty darn amazing."

"So then…?"

"It's just…" Felicity licks her lips, grimacing slightly. "You taste a little ashy." She makes a face, her mouth opening as she continues speaking, rambling, "It's that weird taste when you kiss a smoker, you know, and since we don't smoke - which thank God for that because I have a feeling we're already going to have our hands full with Ellie

and our nightly activities based on what she was doing earlier… alright, side story real quick because it was cute, she was…"

But he doesn't hear the rest of it.

It takes far too long for her words to process, but when they do, they hit him like a shotgun blast straight to his chest. She's tasting the ash and dust and debris from the building collapsing, from his family's building… from the people he'd left behind, the failure he'd left in his wake.

Oliver jerks back, cutting her off as he lets go of her abruptly.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry, I didn't… think. I…"

Without another word, he turns back to the water, pressing his face into the water.

He'd kissed her without hesitation, without a single thought, because all that had mattered was being with her, was reclaiming that feeling that only she could give him. He hadn't even *thought*.

Oliver scrubs his face roughly. He pulls back, wiping the water off before grabbing a bar of soap sitting in the shower caddy hovering in front of him. He washes his face roughly, concentrating on his lips and beard. He does it twice, in quick succession, before he lathers the bar. He has to clean off. He relishes the burn when the soap sinks into the shallow wounds on his palms. He hadn't felt them a second ago - hell, he hadn't felt *anything* a second ago, save for her. It was so easy to get lost in her, to forget anything outside this single moment.

And he can't do that.

"Whoa, hey, hey," Felicity says, grabbing his shoulder to turn him back to her. "I didn't mean it like that." Her hands cover his where he's going to town on the bar of soap. She's looking up at him, he knows that, but all he sees are their hands - the soap suds cover them both, but his are dark from dirt while hers are clean and pristine.

He'd touched her with those hands.

The thought is *vile*.

Oliver pulls away sharply, turning back to the water, but she doesn't let him.

Felicity digs her nails into his hands, stopping him as she says, "Hey, look at me."

He bites the tip of his tongue, his eyes still on their hands. His nails are dirty, ash caked against his cuticles from sweating in his gloves. Hers are so *clean*.

"Oliver." She reaches up, gripping his jaw, trying to force him to look up, but he doesn't budge. "Look at me." He closes his eyes instead, and her voice is sharp when she says, "*Hey*!"

That has his eyes snapping open and meeting hers. The instant they do, she cups his face, stepping closer. He tries to take a step back but he's unwittingly pushed himself into a corner, his back to the tile, leaving nothing but her.

"Tonight wasn't your fault," Felicity says. "This is all on Isabel."

"I know that," Oliver replies instantly, his voice harsher than he'd intended.

Her face pinches, but she doesn't move. She keeps holding him. That somehow makes it worse, because he doesn't *want* her to move. He understands that tonight was a series of events put in place by more people than him, and if he was being brutally honest with himself, he didn't entirely regret it, because it got him Thea back… but that's not it, that's not what's making his insides clench in disgust with himself.

Oliver pulls her hands off his face. "I'm gonna clean up first."

Because he has to. He can't touch her like this.

He doesn't wait for an answer, stepping around her, forcing her to move back… and she relents. Felicity steps out of the way, letting him step into the water. She doesn't speak, his moves robotic as he scrubs the soap up and down his chest and then his arms. He presses it down hard, ignoring the ache in his skin when it starts to hurt.

It's not just the dust he's removing, he's well aware of that. It's more, something he can't put a name to, something he doesn't want to.

He just wants it gone.

Oliver doesn't hear her moving until it's too late.

Felicity hugs him from behind, wrapping herself around him, burying

her face in the middle of his back. He freezes. His hands fall to his sides, his eyes slipping shut, his muscles stiffening as she curls herself around him as much as she can. She takes a deep breath, and it comes out in a shaky sigh. He feels the hard press of her nose against his spine, her lips pressed to his skin, her fingers digging in, like she can't bear the thought of letting him go.

God, he knows that feeling. He knows it so well, and having it come from her…

"Oliver…"

Her tears burn hotter than the water.

"I'm so glad you came home to me," she says softly. She sniffles, shaking her head like she's working through what she wants to say before giving up. She just speaks. "Things could have turned out so bad, and it wasn't… It wasn't *just* Ellie anymore, Oliver, not like before. These last two weeks, they've been *everything* and… I was so scared, because it wasn't just losing Ellie… It was that I might lose *you*." She holds him tighter. "It was that you might not come home to me, that I wouldn't be able to see you, be with you, experience anything with you again." She takes a tremulous breath. "I was so scared that I might never see you again, and that… This scares me, Oliver, so much. It's terrifying how much I love you. How the only thing I could think about when that building was coming down was you, only you. And… for a few seconds there, I didn't *care* about anyone else. I mean, I cared, of course I cared, because what happened tonight was horrible, but… the thought of not seeing you again?" She pauses. "You come first."

He's completely frozen. Her vulnerability cuts through him, and it's all he can do to just breathe.

Felicity takes advantage of it.

She lets him go, just enough to step around him. He doesn't stop her, only opening his eyes when she's in front of him again. The water beats down on them, hot as ever, as she tilts her head, her face softening when their eyes meet.

"It's okay to be glad you survived, Oliver." She stares at him, willing him to hear her. And he does. "Because I'm glad you did. I'm glad it was *you*."

His face crumples slightly as he whispers her name before yanking her

into his arms.

Oliver holds her, just as tightly as she holds him. He buries his face in her neck as she presses hers into his chest. They don't say anything, because there's nothing *to* say, not anymore, because she did the one thing that somehow broke through the wall of guilt that'd been rebuilding itself inside: she reminded him he wasn't alone. He has her, just as much as she has him. And her confidence in him - her confidence in his ability to be there for her - it astounds him, in the best way possible. As long as he has her, things will be okay. And God, he hopes she feels the same way. No… he knows she does.

After a long moment, Felicity pulls back. She doesn't stop touching him, and he's so grateful for that. He feels raw, and her touch soothes him.

"May I?" she whispers, her hand falling down his arm until she reaches the bar of soap in his hand.

He gives it over without argument.

She lathers her hands and starts with his chest. Oliver closes his eyes, leaning into her gentle ministrations, sighing, his muscles slowly relaxing one by one as she works her way across the surface of his skin. She cleans off all the physical remnants of what happened earlier, just as much as she helps quiet the emotional ones. They're not gone, they'll never be gone, but with her… it makes it easier.

When she's done with the soap, they work together to rinse it off before she grabs the shampoo. Her hands massaging his scalp feels *amazing*. He sighs, leaning into her even more, making her let out a little laugh when they nearly topple over. Oliver has to bend over so she can reach all the way around his head, earning him a quirky little smile from her.

It's like a fissure in the tension filling the bathroom, and just like that, the air is suddenly lighter.

"Close your eyes," she says, biting her lip in concentration. "I'm not using Ellie's shampoo so this will hurt if it gets in your eyes." He does as she asks, his hands finding her waist, holding onto her as she works his hair into a lather. "That supposedly 'tearless' shampoo still burns mine, you know. Ellie doesn't seem to mind it, which I don't really get, because that stuff *hurts*. Maybe she gets her freaky soap immunity from you." Her hands stop. "Should we try it?"

Oliver chuckles, shaking his head. "We really, really shouldn't."

He can hear the smile on her face as she says, "I'm just saying, it's good to know these things for the future."

Needing to know about tearless shampoo hurting one's eyes is damn near illogical, and they both know it, but the *meaning* behind it has his heart skipping a beat. Oliver shifts closer to her, his hold on her tightening. Her response is to relax her hands for a second, caressing him softly, holding him against her.

She finishes with the shampoo.

The future.

It feels good to think about, and instead of running away, Oliver lets himself feel it.

She directs him back under the water, but he doesn't let her go, pulling her with him. He bends at the knees, giving her access to his entire scalp. He ignores the sharp ache in his joints and the way his muscles scream with overuse. Ignoring it is very, very easy to do with her right here. As Felicity moves closer, he lets his hands slide around her waist. Oliver presses the full width of his hands across her back. She shivers, her fingers in his hair faltering just enough for him to notice.

He sighs audibly, pushing his face into her chest, forcing her to bow her back slightly. She goes willingly, knowing he'll hold her. His eyes are still closed, but he doesn't need them to know her breasts are right there. Oliver presses his lips to her skin. She's hot and slick from the water, slightly salty, evidence she hasn't showered herself since that morning. She tastes delicious, and his tongue darts out for more.

"Oliver," she says in warning, but he just smiles, his mouth rooting around until he finds a nipple. She hisses, her hands fisting in his hair. "*Oliver*. Conditioner."

"I don't use conditioner," he replies before flicking his tongue over the hard nub. She gasps, her grip on him loosening so she's pushing him closer.

"You really should," she whispers, her head falling back. She's distracted by his mouth, he notes with pride, her words blurring together as she adds, "Your scalp needs nourishment because shampoos…"

He doesn't let her finish.

Oliver stands up, his hands sliding up her back until he reaches the nape of her neck. He grips her tightly, the other sliding around to cup her face, his mouth covering hers. Felicity moans and holds on to him, following his lead. He kisses her deeply, exploring every inch of her, rediscovering; he loves the ardor with which she kisses him back. Her nails dig into him as she pushes herself up onto her toes, trying to get closer, almost like she *needs* it, and *God*, does he know that feeling.

This time nothing stops him from spinning them, moving them until her back hits the tiled wall. The steam from the hot water has more than warmed the slate. Felicity sighs when her skin touches it, using it to arch her back, to press her hips into his.

The second her naked skin brushes over his erection, he gasps against her lips. His arousal had fallen to the wayside for a while, and even her delicate handling of him while she'd soaped him up had been easy to ignore in favor of just feeling her touch. But now heat fills him in a heady rush, making his flesh feel like it's on fire.

"Felicity," he moans, slipping his hands down her sides.

She whines, angling her head to deepen the kiss even further. Not letting her mouth go, Oliver dips down and grips her thighs, yanking her up off her feet. Her breath hitches as he presses her up against the wall. Felicity winds her legs around his hips, locking her ankles over his ass, effectively tugging him closer. The move has his erection sliding right against her wet sex and Oliver's eyes roll back into his head. He's so damned sensitive, and that slight touch has his knees shaking.

Using him as an anchor, Felicity arches her back, rotating her hips, pressing his length firmly between his slick abdomen and her wet heat.

Oliver chokes out a curse, his hips thrusting up as he crowds her against the wall, pushing himself right along her tender little pearl. Felicity cries out, moving her hips again so she's rubbing herself up and down his length. With a harried, "Oh my God," Oliver falls against her, his forehead dropping into the crook of her neck, reveling in her soft cries of pleasure.

He surrounds himself with her, focusing on her, feeling only her…

It's not long, though, before his body starts to fight him. His muscles

tremble, his bones ache, but he ignores it, concentrating on *her.* He has plenty of time to feel the effects of that explosion, and now is so not one of those times.

Still, as much as he wants to sit there and work her up until she's in a frenzy, until all she's capable of is holding onto him as she falls apart, he knows he won't last long, on multiple fronts.

"Hold onto me," Oliver grunts, digging his fingers into her thigh, sliding her further up the wall.

Felicity lets out a breathy chuckle. "Hold onto you tight?"

"Yeah."

"You know…" She winds her arms around his neck, doing exactly as he'd asked. Their noses touch, their lips brushing against the other, their breaths mingling. "This is exactly the situation I imagined you saying that."

He grins. Oliver doesn't need a reminder to know exactly what she's talking about. He remembers with perfect clarity standing in that elevator shaft, his heart dropping when she'd said that. He'd turned to her and it'd taken everything in him to remain still as she'd babbled on about different circumstances.

It feels like just yesterday as much as it feels like it happened a million years ago. He never dreamed he'd get here, to this moment.

Oliver hums, sliding her higher until she's at the perfect angle. He closes his eyes at the effort it takes, pressing his hips up until the head of his erection slips over her. She chokes out his name and it's all he needs to hear to ignore the exhausted trembling in his arms.

He just holds her tighter.

"You know," Oliver whispers, his voice uneven as he brushes over her wet slit before finding her entrance. "I had a feeling."

And then he thrusts into her.

"Ooh!" Felicity cries out. The sound fills the bathroom, echoing his own loud groan as he sinks into her. It overwhelms him. Some part of him is vaguely aware of the hot water still hitting them, of the steam making the room humid, of the slick floor, but all he feels is *her*… her wet silken walls clenching around him, pulling him in deeper.

His hands are shaking where he grips her tight, and it only gets worse when he pulls out with a growled, "Felicity," before thrusting back in. She whimpers, hiking her legs up higher around his waist. She fits against him perfectly, her breasts pressed to his chest, her arms around his neck, her back arched, her hips meeting his thrusts.

Oliver wants to shove her up against the wall and pin her there; he wants to slip his hands down and around her legs, dig his fingers into her soft thighs and pull them up, spread her open for him, knowing when he hits that very right angle he can make her scream…

But he's tired, more tired than he thought possible. It's not just the explosion or the people lost or the knowledge that Slade is back out there. It's learning that the last two weeks he could have lost everything. Discovering that Zoom was so close to his daughter that he could touch her. That he learns with each new day that it is possible to love this woman more.

He's gotten more rest in the last two weeks than he has in the last seven years *combined*, but all of a sudden it's like he hasn't slept in a week.

The last day has been a brutal reminder of how frail everything is, how quickly he can lose it all.

Oliver doesn't realize he's stopped moving altogether until Felicity whispers his name. She shifts slightly, her legs tightening around him, her fingers sifting through his wet hair. Their hips are fused together as tightly as he could get them and he's buried his face against her throat, holding her up just by virtue of the fact that he doesn't want to let go.

"You're trembling," she says, one hand ghosting down his back, the other staying in his hair.

He takes a quick breath, whispering, "I didn't…" before pausing. He has no idea what he wants to say, and when she doesn't say anything, just holding him, he tells himself to at least move… but he doesn't. He can't. And God, he *is* trembling. "Felicity…"

He drags her name out - *Fe-li-ci-ty* - and they both know he's saying so much more. *She* knows. Somehow she always knows.

Felicity turns her face into his, pressing her lips to his temple, kissing a soft line down until she reaches his ear. She kisses the shell gently before whispering, "I see a very nice bench right over there with our

name on it."

He smiles. The movement has his beard scraping against her sensitive skin. She shivers and her inner walls clamp down on him, making him jerk against her, which in turn makes her mewl. That little sound gives him a renewed sense of energy and he stands up a little taller, wanting to hear more…

But she stops him by unwinding her legs, for all intents and purposes forcing him to let her go.

Oliver slides out of her, and the loss of contact has them both gasping with displeasure as he sets her back on her feet.

She instantly grabs his hand, leading him over to the bench. He's close on her heels, and when she lets him go to grab a towel off the rack, he wraps his arms around her waist, pulling her back against him. He's still wet with her arousal and as his erection slides over her back, she gasps and giggles in the same breath, especially when he curls around her, his lips finding her shoulder.

Felicity spreads the towel out, dropping it on the bench.

"C'mere," she says, grabbing his arm, pulling him in front of her, urging him down. When Oliver sits, he lets out a heavy sigh because God, it feels good. He lets himself go, lets himself fall into her safe embrace.

She wastes no time, instantly following, lifting her legs so she's straddling him.

Oliver feels himself hardening, growing taller at the sight of her wet body hovering over his. Her breasts sway softly before him, her hard nipples a dusky pink, her inner thighs so warm where they're pressed against him as her feet curl in behind his knees. Felicity pushes her hands into his hair, scraping her nails over his scalp as she angles his head up to hers. She pushes herself flush against him and he feels her delicious heat all over again, waiting for him.

He doesn't wait - he *can't*.

She kisses him, softly, delicately, gently sucking his bottom lip between hers, eliciting a gasp from him. It only makes him harder.

Oliver reaches between them and positions himself perfectly. He moves back to her hip, ready to push up into her, but she doesn't wait

either.

Felicity sinks down on him, taking his entire length in one thrust.

"*God*," he groans, his eyes squeezing shut. He's *deeper*, so much deeper, and she's so tight.

She starts slow, lifting herself up just enough to move, but it's like she can't stand the idea of being away from him. The thrusts are small, intimate, *perfect*… and then she starts moving more. She grabs his shoulders for leverage, using him to lift herself higher, her hips falling down harder… leaving him completely free to explore every inch of her.

His hands circle her waist, slipping over her wet skin, before sliding up to her ribs, his thumbs brushing the underside of her breasts. It elicits the most beautiful breathless little moan from her and he does it again before finding her nipples. Oliver watches her face when he flicks them, marveling at her parted lips, the way need twists her features, how her skin flushes…

"You are so beautiful," he rasps. So pure, so light, and it's all washing through him. "Felicity…"

"Yes…" she sighs, her voice drugged with pleasure, managing a ragged, "Oliver…" before her lips cover his again.

Oliver wraps himself around her, holding her tight, one hand slipping down her back, urging her down harder as his other tangles in her hair. They moan in tandem, moving together, building with each other, their cries growing louder.

His pleasure builds fast, alarmingly fast. He feels the beginning burn at the base of his spine, feels it coiling tighter and tighter, his need for *more* slicing through him.

He's completely lost in her.

"Oh god…!" Felicity gasps with a shudder, her grip on him suddenly tightening.

"Yes," Oliver whispers, holding her closer. He's spent so much time over the last two weeks learning her body, and he knows the second she's close. He breathes her in, whispering her name over and over, urging her over as his body starts to shake with his. Her walls clench around him, the beginning ripples of her orgasm making his eyes roll

in the back of his head. He pushes her down harder, guiding her when her hips lose all rhythm, holding her when all she can do is hold him tighter and tighter, lost in her pleasure. Pure elation fills him that she can let go so much with him, that she lets him have everything, *knowing* he's there to catch her. That thought has his own pleasure spiking, and he digs his fingers into her, rocking up into her as hard as he can. He's so close… "Felicity… please…!"

His voice is her undoing. She falls to pieces in his arms with a series of sharp shouts that echo through the bathroom, and he's right behind her. Oliver comes, spilling into her with a heady cry that's even louder than hers. He thrusts into her wildly, her walls coaxing more out of him, until he has nothing left.

Oliver falls forward into her, and they both hold on, riding the crest together, gasping for air in breathless moans.

Felicity's breath hitches, and with a surprising amount of strength hugs him harder. She digs her face into the side of his, her pants loud in his ear as she gasps his name. It's imploring, laced with everything they've been through tonight. Oliver chokes out a barely audible, "I'm here… I'm here…" as he hugs her with just as much vehemence.

She nods, hearing him, but she doesn't let go, not for a long, long time.

"I love you," he whispers, the words muffled against her skin. "I love you."

Felicity finally lets out a heavy exhale, and just like that, the tension in her body disappears. Oliver pulls his face along hers, blindly seeking her lips. The kiss is wet and sloppy, their uneven breathing making it shorter than he'd like, but it's *everything* at the same time.

"I love you," she breathes, her lips moving over his. She kisses him again. And again… The kisses grow longer, deeper, and her movements almost have him sliding right out of her. His hand slips down to her backside again, pressing her close, ensuring he doesn't leave her wet heat just yet. She whimpers for him.

Oliver's not sure how much time passes before they pull away from each other. She doesn't go very far, pressing her forehead to his.

"I gotta say…" she says. "The water heater in this house is kind of amazing."

Oliver pauses at that - it's the *last* thing he was expecting to hear - and then he laughs, because it actually is. They've been in there way too long already and the water is still hot as hell.

Felicity grins at the sound and it's absolutely gorgeous. She runs her fingers down the side of his face, her nails rasping over his wet beard as she continues, "We should probably get back out there."

Oliver sighs. "Yeah."

He doesn't want to move, he really doesn't… but he also does, if just to see his daughter. The thought of crawling into bed with both of them, curling around his girls, creating a cocoon as he holds them…

It's exactly what he needs.

"Plus," Felicity adds, scrubbing her fingers over his scruff, making a face. "My fingers are getting pruny."

With a breathy chuckle, he kisses her once more before nodding. It's honestly all he has the energy to do right now, but the tired feeling in his limbs is the very, very good kind. The bone-deep exhaustion is gone, leaving him feeling like he's floating.

Felicity doesn't move though. Instead she pulls back and cups his face. She studies him, running her thumb over the corner of his mouth. The move has him smiling in response as he looks up at her.

She meets his eyes, her voice quiet as she asks, "You okay?"

Oliver almost answers with his usual, '*I'm fine'* - it's instinctual, really, deeply-ingrained, even with her still - but he notices the instant she sees right through it. Her tensing minutely and the tiny tick of her eyebrow going up makes him pause.

"I'm… better," he replies. Her shoulders relax, and he knows she's seeing the truth in his eyes. It warms his chest in a way he's never felt before. Oliver presses a kiss to her thumb before whispering, "Thank you."

Felicity just smiles.

"And you?" he asks, running his hands up and down her spine.

Her smile grows. "Better." She kisses him, lingering. "Mm. Much, much better."

It's a long moment before they finally move. When she announces, "Okay, this pruniness is getting ridiculous," Oliver's hands drop to her hips and he helps lift her up and off him. They both make unhappy noises as he leaves her warmth, but they're short-lived because Oliver's quick to stand right along with her, a renewed energy coursing through him as his lips find hers once more.

They rinse off, having to clean up all over again in some instances. It's something Oliver finds an obscene amount of joy in when he takes cleaning between her thighs with his fingers a little too seriously. That joy doubles when she grabs onto him, her legs quaking as he slips over her swollen flesh, pausing to rub the tender sides of her clit. He only relents when she hisses his name and smacks his hand away, reminding him that Digg is still out there. That actually makes him blush slightly and he mumbles a curse under his breath - because they'd *both* been loud. Felicity giggles when she sees the color rising in his cheeks.

By the time they leave, the water finally starts to cool down.

Felicity purses her lips as they dry off, eyeing her discarded clothes with displeasure. She makes her way over to them as she wraps the towel around her chest, tucking in the end to secure it. "Didn't plan this very well, did I?"

"I don't know," Oliver replies where he's standing behind her. His eyes are on her as she leans down to pick the clothes up, giving him the perfect view of her backside. The towel pulls tight around it, making him lick his lips. Without a second thought, he comes up behind her and yanks on the bottom of the towel, effectively unwinding it.

"Hey!" Felicity yelps, spinning back to him. "Oliver!" He gives her a smile that makes her whack his arm as she adds, "I don't think Diggle wants to see me naked right now."

"But I want to see you naked right now," he says, trying to wrap his arms around her waist but she dodges away from him.

"You just did," she reminds him, holding the towel in place. "A lot, I might add."

He wants to play with her, hear more of that gorgeous, addicting laugh of hers and see the way she flushes when she gets exasperated with him, but they have later for that. And it *has* to be later - they need to fight now to get those moments later.

With a soft sigh, Oliver ties his own towel off around his waist, giving her a meaningful, "I'm sorry," before kissing her chastely.

Felicity snorts. "I'd believe that if you weren't ogling my butt right now."

Oliver chuckles at that. "How about I go relieve Digg and get you some clothes," he offers. "Okay?"

"Okay." Felicity kisses him, right through his breathy, "Okay," before he turns to the door. The second his back is to her, she slaps his ass, and it's his turn to jump, spinning around to face her. She just winks at him. "Hurry up."

He narrows his eyes, fighting the urge to go to her again. "Do you want me to take you back into that shower, Felicity?"

She bites her lip, her eyes dropping down to his naked chest, her pupils widening all over again.

"I was just being helpful," she says, and neither of them miss her voice dropping an octave. "Encouraging you to hurry up."

He has to grip the doorknob to keep himself in place as he says, "You're trouble."

"And you love it."

"Yes," Oliver answers honestly. "I do."

Felicity's grins is instantaneous and playful and it almost has him moving back to her. She must read the intention on his face because she waves at the door. "Go."

He winks at her, letting his eyes drop down her body once more, earning him a healthy blush, before he does just that.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

> Chapter specific warnings for graphic violence, mortal peril and serious injuries.

The second Oliver opens the bathroom door, Diggle is up and off the bed.

He'd had the television on - Oliver hadn't even noticed that when he'd first come in, nor had he seen his Arrow gear where it's neatly stacked near the door, Frank being true to his word about bringing it up.

The TV volume is relatively low, because Ellie is still knocked out where she sleeps on the bed, which means…

Oliver pulls the door shut behind him to give Felicity privacy, his eyebrows going up as the other man walks right past him and straight for the door to the hall.

"Digg-"

"Scratch what I said earlier about you not owing me anything," Diggle says, shaking his head, giving Oliver *a look*. He points at the bathroom. "That. You owe me for that. You two can't help yourselves, which, hey, I get, but that can never happen again when I'm around." He waves his hands. "No."

"I'm sorry, that was…" Oliver blushes - *again* - but he can't help the giant grin that crosses his face at the seriousness exuding from his friend. "Digg, we didn't mean-"

"Hey, look," Diggle interrupts, stopping at the door long enough to look back at him. "I'm happy for you, Oliver. For both of you. I love you both like family, you know that. You guys deserve this." He shakes his head. "But not when I'm around." He keeps shaking his head as he turns to leave, his voice trailing after him as he continues, "I cannot hear what I just heard again. Hell no. Next time I'm taking the kid with me and we're scattering."

Oliver chuckles, following after him. "Hey…"

He has every intention of sharing his gratitude for his putting up with them, maybe even offering to babysit for him and Lyla in the future,

but Diggle suddenly pauses, which has Oliver stopping dead in his tracks. When the other man turns back to face him, all traces of humor are gone, and in its place is a grave look that has nothing to do with what just happened over the last hour.

Oliver's stomach sinks. "What is it?"

"I didn't want to ruin the mood," Digg says. Oliver frowns. "But I don't want to wait until tomorrow."

"What?"

"I got a text from Sara with an update from QC," he replies, looking uneasy. It's a jarring sight on the other man, one Oliver isn't used to. He instantly knows it's bad, that it's everything they'd feared.

"Slade's not there," Oliver fills in.

"Yeah." The other man nods. "With the ARGUS team helping, they're working through the debris pretty quick, which is good. There were survivors, Oliver, from other floors in the building. The alarms saved a lot of people, man, but… not the men in the basement. Isabel's mirakuru army. Sara said they're all gone."

Oliver closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He'd stepped away from it, even for a few minutes, and the reprieve had let him breathe. It's going to have to carry him through the rest of the night, and the coming days, because none of this is over, not by a longshot.

Survivors, that's the best news he's heard all night. And the mirakuru men…

He sighs, scrubbing his hand over his face. They were criminals, if what they'd found earlier was any indication, but in this instance, they were innocents. If they'd been faster, if they'd been more careful, if they could find the right cure, they might have been saved.

But Slade…

"We'll get him, Oliver," Diggle says. Oliver can only nod. Digg reaches out, clamping a strong hand on his shoulder. "We will, man. He's not coming anywhere near you and yours again. Not if I have anything to say about it."

Oliver nods. "Thank you," he whispers. The intensity in those two words resonates between them.

Diggle just nods, giving him a smile. "Get some sleep."

"Yeah," he sighs. "You too."

With one last nod, Digg turns and makes his way down the hall.

"And thank you," Oliver adds, "for Ellie."

"I will babysit that little girl until the end of time," Diggle replies. "But only if it means I don't have to hear what I heard a few minutes ago ever again."

Oliver manages a grin and Diggle just waves over his shoulder before disappearing down the hall.

He hears the soft shuffle of Felicity's feet on the carpet behind him before she says, "So Slade survived."

Oliver wants to protect her, protect both of them. He wants to lie, to tell her everything will be okay, but they both know that's crap. There's no use beating around the bush. He bows his head before turning back to the room. She's out of the bathroom, wrapped in her towel again.

"Yeah," he says.

She lets out a tremulous breath and a quick nod. "Okay." Her eyes find Ellie. "Okay."

"Hey," Oliver says, making his way back over to her. Her eyes are glued to Ellie. He cups her cheek, pulling her gaze back to his. "I'm so s…" he starts but her eyes instantly narrowing stops him, because she *knows* he's about to apologize. Instead he says, "I won't let him hurt you or Ellie again, Felicity. I promise."

"I know," she replies, nodding. "And you. You have to include you in that, Oliver."

"I do," he says, and he means it. "I finally have something I want to live for, to be here for, something that's mine. I'm not going anywhere, not if I can help it, and neither are you. I can't… I won't let him take any of us."

"Good. Good." The fear is still very real in her eyes though, and he pulls her closer. "I guess that's why we got this fancy house, right? So we can be together, and because nobody knows we're here. So that's…

That makes me feel a little better." She sighs, closing her eyes, melting into his embrace. "Okay, a lot."

Oliver kisses her forehead. "I love you."

Felicity leans into his chest, wrapping her arms around him. "I love you, too."

A long moment passes where they just hold each other. He isn't sure exactly how it happens or when, but suddenly they both realize they need the peace they'd found in the bathroom to keep going, to get through the very real and very present danger that feels like it will always be there.

"Digg's never gonna watch Ellie again, is he?" Felicity asks.

It's the exact right thing to say, because his chest suddenly loosens and he takes a deep breath.

Oliver smiles. "No, he's just never gonna watch her with us right next door again. He said we can't help ourselves."

Felicity scoffs. "That's ridiculous, we have tons of self-control."

He raises an eyebrow at her. "Really?" he asks. He hooks his finger in her towel, right between her breasts. Her reaction is instantaneous, and that alone is enough to make his breath hitch. Her pupils dilate, her lips parting. Oliver's eyes drop to her mouth. "Oh sure," he whispers, "tons of self-control."

"Not…" Felicity pushes his hand away. "When you do that." He doesn't let her get very far. Oliver grabs her hand, tangling their fingers together. The kiss they share is simple, cleansing, and it's exactly what they need… soft and quiet, at least until she hooks *her* finger in *his* towel. Felicity tugs. Oliver scrunches his nose at her and she scrunches hers back as she says, "See? That was self-control right there." He snorts out a little laugh. "Plus," she whispers, pushing up onto her toes to get closer. "Cameras."

With a soft curse, Oliver lets her go. "I completely forgot about the cameras." She grins, nudging his chest before turning towards the closet. He follows after her, but not without glancing around, feeling the sudden need to *know* where they are, that they do exist… except they aren't anywhere to be found. Keeping his voice low for Ellie's sake, he looks again, closer, but still can't see them. "Where exactly are they?"

"Every corner," Felicity replies, her voice muffled in the closet. A second later she comes out, fully dressed. Despite how much he enjoys seeing her bare skin, he loves seeing her in her pajamas, especially those pants - they're covered in a bunch of oddly-shaped dancing coffee cakes with the words 'Java Junkie' floating everywhere. They're so *Felicity*. "ARGUS already had the house wired with them, so setting up was pretty darn easy. They're in every single room." She points back at the closet. "Not in there though. Or the bathrooms." Her eyes widen. "God, I hope they don't have any in the bathrooms. No, no, they don't, I checked. But now I'm suddenly not so sure because *that* just happened and oh God, what if there really are cameras in the bathroom…"

"If you checked," Oliver says, giving her a kiss, "then I'm sure there aren't any in there."

"I hope so. It was kinda funny with Digg, but that's Digg. His face does that thing. It would be not so funny with everyone else." She blanches at the thought. "Not exactly what I want seen by anyone else, really. Like, ever. Sex tapes are only sexy when it's us watching them."

That has him raising an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

Felicity rolls her eyes. "Of course that's all you heard. I'm talking about cameras possibly having caught a very private moment, and *that's* what you focus on." But he definitely doesn't miss the light flush - and it's a *flush*; she's not blushing - that skates over her chest and up her neck. She likes the idea, and he likes that she likes it. His face must reflect that because she points at him. "Go get dressed before you get me in trouble, Oliver."

Oliver just smiles at her, lasciviously - which only makes her flush more - before doing as she says. The thought of sex tapes is appealing as *hell*, but his mind is still admittedly on the cameras currently watching them at this very moment. And those take precedent, for more than one reason.

He wonders just how many cameras are in the house, and how they're all set up.

Oliver gets dressed quickly, opting for sweats and a t-shirt. He can tell it's getting late; when he strains his ears, he can hear everyone else starting to settle down around them as well.

Switching off the closet light, he comes out to find Felicity's picked up her laptop and is sitting on the unoccupied side of the bed. Without

looking up and before he can say anything, she says, "The basement door is just off the kitchen." She glances at him with a smile. "Go check it out. And you should definitely double check to make sure there aren't cameras in the bathroom. I'm about ninety-eight percent sure they *aren't*… but still."

He makes his way over to her. "You're amazing."

"I know."

Oliver chuckles and the second he reaches her, he runs his fingers through her damp hair before leaning over to kiss her. "I'll be right back."

"We'll be here," she replies with a smile. It's contagious and it makes his chest ache in such a good way. God, he loves her so much.

And then Oliver only has eyes for Ellie.

He rounds the bed, noting the strange contraption that he remembers Cisco showing him earlier - it's the tachyon detector, albeit much smaller than the original model, this one made specifically for Ellie and turned into a necklace - on the nightstand. Oliver kneels next to her. His daughter is out like a light, drool already making its way down her cheek, creating a healthy little puddle under her face. It's indescribably adorable that she's a drooler. One thing he has discovered over the last few weeks is that she definitely gets it from Felicity, which only makes it *cuter*. He runs his thumb over her cheek - it's smooth and pink again, her eyes and nose clean, the remnants from her crying cleaned away.

Oliver smooths his hand over her wild curls, letting it fall down and over her back. She doesn't budge. He presses a soft kiss to her forehead, whispering, "I love you, Ellie-bug," before he pulls the comforter back up around her. He looks up, catching Felicity watching them with a purely content smile. He winks at her, adding, "I'll be back," to which she nods before he goes.

Most of the lights are still on.

He automatically makes his way to Thea and Roy. He knows his sister is safe, but he just needs to *see* her. They're both exactly where he left them. Oliver pauses in the doorway. Someone turned the main light off, leaving most of the ambient light to come from the connected bathroom. There's a new chair in there now, which someone brought in for Moira.

She's laid back in it, her hand in Thea's, eyes closed. Only his mother can be asleep and still look as regal as if she were wide awake and meeting with her constituents.

At least when she *looks* like she's asleep.

Her eyes slip open, only slightly, flying to him when his movements cause the light in the shadowed room to change. She's ever-vigilant, Moira Queen, and Oliver knows he has nothing to worry about with her there at his sister's side.

"Just checking in," Oliver whispers. "Everything okay?"

Moira nods, glancing at Thea. She squeezes her daughter's hand. "As okay as it can be, I suppose." She looks back at Oliver. "You should get some sleep, too. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

The amount of understatement in those simple words is astounding. Oliver nods solemnly. "Yeah. I will. You should, too." They both know it's easier said than done, which is why he adds, "Call if you need anything?"

Moira smiles. "Of course."

"'Night, Mom."

"Goodnight, Oliver."

The house is filled with doors, he's discovering as he makes his way toward the kitchen, following Felicity's directions to the basement. How many closets or pantries does a place need?

When he reaches the basement door, it's already cracked open, a healthy beam of light shining from down below. There's a low hum, one that most people would dismiss, and the second Oliver pulls the door open, it grows louder. He can already see the play of colors from the multiple screens on the carpeted stairs as he makes his way down.

For reasons he can't quite fathom he isn't surprised when he finds Frank manning the monitors.

The ARGUS agent glances back at him casually, offering a warm, friendly smile, and it's evident that he already knew Oliver was coming. Maybe it's because of the real peril they're all dallying with, or maybe it's because he's known this man almost his entire life, but the idea of him keeping watch over them doesn't feel like an intrusion.

"Good evening, sir."

"Hi," Oliver replies, coming to stand next to him to see what the set-up is like. And… it is impressive. *Incredibly* impressive. One entire wall of the basement is just screens. The desk before all of them has four different keyboards and there's a steady whir from a series of heavy-duty servers along the opposite wall. This isn't *just* a safe house, Oliver realizes. Which really shouldn't be that surprising, considering it's ARGUS-sanctioned. It's still damn awe-inspiring. "Wow."

"We have an eye on everything," Frank says by way of response, nodding to the screens.

The agent is obviously well-practiced at surveillance, because when Oliver looks at the wall of images again it instantly makes his head hurt. How the hell does someone keep an eye on everything all at once? But as the minutes pass and he gets used to it, he finds himself settling into a pattern, his eyes bouncing over the screens, focusing long enough to get a lay of the room before moving on. It's suddenly easier.

When he finds his and Felicity's bedroom, he pauses. A serene smile lights his face as he watches Felicity pull back the comforter on her side. She slips in, moving until she's pressed close to Ellie before balancing her laptop on her lap again.

Her words come back to him and Oliver asks, "Are there cameras in the bathrooms?"

Frank doesn't skip a beat, shaking his head. "No, sir." It's even, damn near monotone, but Oliver doesn't miss the hint of the other man's smile.

It should be worrying that this man knows so much about his life, about the lives of his loved ones. He knows Oliver's The Arrow and Oliver can only assume that he knows about Ellie. It *should* be worrying, but it's not.

"You know…" Grabbing a chair next to him, Oliver sits down, settling in for a while. "I think now's a nice time for that talk, Frank." His eyes bounce around the screens, taking each one in. He finds all of the team members - most of them are settled into bed, either asleep or watching TV or talking.

It's almost peaceful. Which is ridiculous, because he knows it's really not a peaceful time. At all.

"I'm an open book," Frank replies.

Oliver shoots him a wry smile - he believes him, and he's starting to wonder what it is exactly about this man that is so damn trustworthy.

He looks back at the screens. "How about we start with…"

But the words die on his lips.

His gaze has found his bedroom again, just as it has a dozen times already, fulfilling the overwhelming need to see his family at all times…

Except this time, Felicity and Ellie aren't alone.

His entire world hones in on that screen as Malcolm Merlyn slips inside their window.

For a split second, fear strangles Oliver so abruptly he can't move.

It happens so fast, too fast for him to wonder what Merlyn's doing there, how he found them, what he wants. Oliver doesn't process the horror of seeing him in full League-wear or Felicity's startled jump before she instantly falls back on Ellie, putting herself between their daughter and the very real danger in their room. And danger he is. Merlyn is an infected wound in the cheerful space, sucking out all the light and goodness with his presence alone.

Oliver hones in on that one screen, somehow picking up the faint sound feed just enough to hear, "You're in my way, Ms. Smoak," before he's moving.

He darts around the bed, a blur of darkness, aiming straight for Ellie.

"No!" Oliver gasps. He shoves away from the desk and vaults up the stairs. "No!"

Felicity's scream for him is heard all the way down in the basement.

When he looks back on all of this later, Oliver will realize a great many things about this moment. He's vaguely aware of Frank immediately contacting ARGUS for backup, of Digg being strangely absent, of his mother locking and barricading the doors to protect herself and Thea…

But while it's happening, all Oliver can focus on - all he thinks about - is *them*. Every rapid, staccato footstep on the stairs reverberates

through his body and it all sounds like their names.

Ellie.

Felicity.

He can't move fast enough. The air itself becomes dense, holding him back, like he's fighting quicksand. He's running as fast as he can, he knows that, but it's not nearly fast enough. Fear shoots through him, making his entire chest vibrate with it, amplifying the wild thought echoing on a loop in his mind; '*Not them, not them, not them.'*

If he could drown in the mixture of terror and adrenaline flooding his veins right now, he probably would.

Oliver bursts through the basement door, sending it ricocheting off the wall with a violent thud as he shouts for Felicity, for Ellie. The hallway back to their room feels *endless*, and the only person he sees on the way is Cisco. The scientist tries to stop him, tries to tell him something, to ask something, but Oliver doesn't *care*. He pushes the younger man out of the way, shoving him into the wall, barely comprehending what he's doing.

All he sees are the double doors, cracked open just like he'd left them, seemingly *normal*.

"Felicity!" he yells. "Ellie!"

Oliver flings the door open with a desperation that is way too damned familiar, eyes instantly flying to the bed, to the last place he saw his family… but they don't make it. He stops the second he finds her.

It's a sight that will haunt him for years to come.

Felicity's slumped on the floor, propped awkwardly against the dresser. Her hair's draped across her slackened face and there's a steady stream of blood at her temple, staining the golden tresses. She's curled in on herself, her arm twisted on the ground at an unnatural angle… and she's not moving. She's not *moving.* Oliver chokes audibly on his next breath as the reality of what that means hits him.

He can't lose both of them - he can't.

Oliver's entire world turns upside down in the space of that single second. Nausea rockets through him, a pain he's never felt in his life slicing through his gut, cutting him from the inside out…

Until Ellie's terrified, "*Daddy*!" snaps him back.

Ellie. She's *here*. She hasn't disappeared. She's alive, which means Felicity's alive.

Oliver isn't able to fully comprehend that because he's turning to where Malcolm's holding his daughter, heading right for the window.

The intention in every line of the other man's body is clear - he's going to jump out, head-first.

Oliver wasn't fast enough to save Felicity, something that will live with him for the rest of his life, but he is in time to save Ellie. A few seconds later, and she'd be gone…

For good.

"Go away!" Ellie shrieks again, pushing at Malcolm's face futilely with her little fingers.

The primal fear tainting her voice hits Oliver harder than anything he's felt in his life. *Not again*. She's been through enough - *too* much - to go through this again. Rage replaces the terror of the unknown, washes away the fear and concern and horror - *everything* - leaving nothing but cold purpose.

Oliver's never hated anyone as much as he does in this moment.

He moves, pure instinct guiding him as he grabs his bow and quiver. He already has an arrow nocked and before he can blink, he lets it loose, straight for Malcolm Merlyn.

It moves like it weighs a thousand pounds.

Oliver knows that things aren't moving as slowly as he's perceiving them - even though the arrow seems to hang in the air, taking *forever*. He's aware that's an illusion of panic and battle, one that he knows full well. Reality is a different story. Oliver's fast, his aim is true, and Malcolm can't move fast enough to avoid it. He'd aimed for the back of the man's head, the swift, cold urge to *protect* dictating his aim, but a deeply buried instinct has Merlyn shifting at the last second, forcing the arrow into his shoulder. It pierces through his League garb and Malcolm grunts with pain, stumbling.

Ellie slips in his arms, nearly falling to the ground.

"No!" Oliver shouts, starting forward to try and catch her, but the little girl uses it to her advantage. Malcolm's gripping her under her arms and she twists, sinking her teeth into his hand as hard as she can.

Malcolm yelps in pain, growling, "You little…" as he twists his hand away from her, but she's still moving.

Ellie kicks at him, scratching at his face with all of her nails, her voice shrill as she yells, "You go away, bad man. Go away!"

He doesn't let her go though, which has Oliver growling with rage. He stalks towards them, snapping, "Malcolm!" as he nocks another arrow. "Let her *go*!" His voice reverberates through the room as he lets the arrow fly loose, the sharp snap of its release emphasizing his words.

Malcolm dodges the arrow at the last second again, distracted with the wriggling toddler in his arms. When he moves to let it fly past his face with alarming speed, burying itself in the wall behind him instead, she twists right out of his arms.

Ellie lands with a solid thud and sharp cry, but she isn't deterred. She kicks at Malcolm's legs for good measure before scrambling away.

Oliver drops to a knee, holding his arm out for her as he shouts, "C'mere, baby. C'mere!" His voice bounces off the walls, uneven in a way he's never heard before, with the fear he's not letting himself feel. As Malcolm swings back to face them, his eyes intent on Ellie in a way that has a cold sweat breaking out over Oliver's body, the only damn thing he wants in the world is to hold her. To make sure she's okay, to *feel* her in his arms, to know she's really alive. "Ellie!"

But she doesn't head for him.

She only has eyes for Felicity.

Ellie practically throws herself in her mother's direction, tripping on her own feet in the process. The toddler lands with a heavy plop on her stomach, narrowly missing smashing her face on the ground, but she's already up in the next second. Her sobs echo through the room, growing louder and more urgent. When she reaches Felicity, she crawls up on her lap, yanking on her shirt. Her hands are shaking as she grabs at the material, pulling on it, shaking her as hard as she can.

"*Momma*!" she cries. "Momma, *please*." Little hiccupping gulps wrack her tiny body. "Momma, *wake up*!"

Felicity doesn't respond.

It hits him that Ellie saw it, she saw all of it - Malcolm appearing out of thin air, diving towards her, Felicity trying to protect her, calling for him, but all of it in vain. She saw her mother attacked - *again* - only to be grabbed, almost stolen away from her family. And now his little girl is begging her mother to wake up, begging her to come back to her, and the thought that she believes that might not happen is absolutely brutalizing.

White hot rage burns through him. He's so angry his vision blurs at the edges, tinged red with ire.

His hands are perfectly still, deadly and calm, a sharp contrast to Ellie's shaking ones as he stands, already grabbing another arrow. He lets it loose, aimed straight for Malcolm. Oliver moves to cover Ellie, to be the barrier between this monster and his family. Each inch is punctuated by another arrow, and in the blink of an eye, he's let loose three more.

But now all of Malcolm's attention is on him. He's *ready*, and he dodges two of the arrows, knocks one out of the air and catches the fourth. He snaps it in half with one hand before breaking the shaft of the one still buried in his shoulder.

"You really do have unfortunate timing, Oliver," he says, dropping the arrow pieces.

Oliver doesn't get the chance to respond, because suddenly Ellie's on her feet, standing before Felicity in a protective stance that mirrors Oliver's as she shouts, "You hurt my Momma again!" She's a blur of action as she grabs the closest thing to her - one of her sandals, a pink thing covered in bejeweled flowers - and hurls it at Malcolm. The dark archer doesn't even flinch, staring at her with unbridled annoyance on his face as the shoe hits him square in the shins. "You're a bad man, a *bad man*!"

Her words rattle through his mind: "*You hurt my Momma again!"*

God, Oliver's going to *kill him*.

The dark, ugly sneer on the other man's face had once upon a time sent an icy chill falling down his spine, because he'd feared this man was better than him.

Not anymore.

As Ellie's gut-wrenching sobs tear through the room, Oliver grits his teeth, keeping his bow steady on Malcolm.

"Ellie," he says, his voice low but full of command. "*Run.*"

"No, Daddy!" Ellie yells, her voice cracking with tears. She turns back to Felicity, picking up her arm, the one that isn't bent awkwardly. She tugs on it, each one emphasized by a sob that tears him open. "I have to take care of Momma!"

He can't help it, he can't - he glances back and the sight of her trying to take Felicity with her cuts through him like a fine, serrated knife. It takes everything in him not to grab her and run, just to make sure she's *safe*…

But he *can't*, not with Malcolm there. And he will do anything - *anything* - to ensure that twisted excuse for a man never comes near his family again.

His eyes find Malcolm's again. The other man's gaze is on him now, cold and calculating.

"Ellie!" Oliver snaps. He hears her quick inhale, and he feels her eyes on him, knows she's responding to the sharp order in his voice. "*Now*. Get to Diggle or Frank. Go!"

There's a pause, and then she lets out a helpless little cry that he will remember for the rest of his life before he hears her bare little feet running for the door. Her sobs follow, echoing down the hall as she goes, her voice growing louder, the words garbled by fear-laced pleas as she shouts, "Uncle Digg!"

Malcolm watches her disappear with a sour look before his eyes snap back to Oliver. "That wasn't very wise of you, Oliver."

"Wise?" Oliver interrupts on a growl.

Malcolm just raises an eyebrow - like Oliver's a mere *nuisance* - and talks over him. "I was just going to borrow her-"

"Borrow? *Borrow*? You were…" Oliver takes a step towards him, his voice rising. "You do not go *near* my daughter, you son of a bitch. How dare you come into *my* home, come after *my daughter*, my *wife*…" His words don't even register - they aren't true, not yet, but it doesn't matter because in this moment, they *are*. "Who the hell…"

"As annoying as I find your girlfriend, Oliver," Malcolm replies, "I had no desire to hurt her." He gestures to Felicity's prone form dismissively as he adds, "She made the mistake of getting in my way." Oliver curses at him, barely keeping himself from putting an arrow through his eye. "Your little time traveler has proven exceedingly difficult to get alone."

Ellie.

He went through Felicity to get to Ellie.

"If she's not okay, I swear…" Oliver manages, barely getting the words out, barely able to comprehend the possibility that she might be hurt, that she got hurt protecting Ellie, that Malcolm wants Ellie at all…

"Relax," Malcolm says, a mocking smirk coloring his lips. He takes a step and Oliver mirrors him without a single thought. They move, shifting around each other like moons in orbit. But Oliver never, ever lets him near Felicity, keeping him at bay. When Malcolm realizes it, his eyes darting down to Felicity, his smirk grows into a smile. "I merely drugged her. The head wound wasn't even intentional. If she'd fought less, I wouldn't have had to do anything to her at all. I just needed the girl."

"Why?" Oliver demands, tightening his grip on the bow. It groans under the pressure. "What could you possibly want with my daughter?"

"Insight, Oliver," Malcolm says with a terrifying sense of wonder. "The future is completely unknowable. Except to her. She alone has its secrets locked away in her little mind. She knows what happens, what will happen. She alone holds the key - to the League, to the city…"

"To you?" Oliver fills in, seeing right through him. "She's *three years old*, Malcolm. What makes you think she knows anything, especially about you?"

"Because of you," Malcolm says, as if that explains everything. "She's your daughter, Oliver, and despite the questionable choices you have made, you have proven that you're not a complete fool. You would have prepared her, just as I would have prepared my own daughter. Like I will prepare Thea."

"You will not go *near* Thea," Oliver snaps, pulling on his bow. "Or Ellie. Not ever again."

"Don't make the mistake of assuming I'll just leave, Oliver," Malcolm

says. "You're smarter than that."

Oliver grits his teeth, because he does know that. He swallows, forcing himself to wait. The others had to have heard them, they had to be coming. He and Malcolm are still moving, dancing around each other as he asks, "And then what, Malcolm? How did you think you'd get to Thea? What made you think you could sneak in and steal my daughter and then just walk out with-"

"Don't be foolish," Malcolm interrupts. He pauses, closer to the door. It doesn't escape Oliver's attention when the other man's hand moves to grip the hilt of his sword. Oliver holds his bow tighter, squeezing the arrow he has at the ready. If Malcolm takes one more step, he has no qualms about putting an arrow through him. There's plenty of body parts the man doesn't *need*. Malcolm continues, "I was going to get what I needed out of your precious little Ellie and then use her to get Thea. You've proven most recently that you're willing to trade for your loved ones' sakes, even when it's ill advised."

"You really think Thea would want that?" Oliver asks. "Did you ever stop to consider that? And what about Tommy? You think this is the kind of father your son would be proud of?" The mention of Tommy does exactly what Oliver wanted - it throws him off. Malcolm is aware enough of himself that he barely reacts, but he can't stop the slight tick of his eye or the way his gaze narrows with a new intent, an intent worthy of the League of Assassins. It tells Oliver he's hit a nerve. "What would he think knowing you were going to *interrogate* my daughter? That you were going to use a three-year-old as a bargaining chip? That you lied to him, that you want to turn his sister into a disgusting version of you… That you *murdered* him?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Malcolm snaps. "So I suggest you stop talking before you no longer can. Now get out of my way or I will cut you down." He moves back towards the door, but Oliver tightening his grip on the arrow has him freezing. "I will get my answers, Oliver. And I will get my daughter. There's nothing you can do to stop that." He meets his gaze steadily. "*Move*."

"No. You're not going anywhere and you are *not* taking anyone." The vehement promise in Oliver's voice fills the room. "Not ever again."

"Do not force my hand, Oliver," Malcolm says, the anger in his words growing. "I wasn't going to hurt your precious little Ellie, but now…"

That is the entirely wrong thing to say.

Oliver reacts on instinct alone.

He steps forward, releasing the arrow. It sails through the air, and Malcolm dodges it easily, just as Oliver lets another fly. He knocks that one out of the air as well, but before he can do anything, Oliver's on him. He swings his bow like a staff, aiming to shove it straight through Malcolm's face, but the soft sound of Malcolm's sword slipping from its sheath sounds and then his sword is up, blocking it.

"You will never go near her again," Oliver growls. "Do you hear me?"

"We'll just have to see about that, won't we?" Malcolm says with a smile that makes Oliver *snap*.

When Oliver swings his bow again, he puts every ounce of strength he has behind it. Malcolm is right there, deflecting him, his sword coming up, meeting him in a violent clash of metal-on-metal. The collision vibrates through Oliver's arm so quickly and so hard that he winces in pain, but he doesn't let it stop him. He pulls it back, swinging again and Malcolm meets him with his own angry grunt.

The fight is *brutal*.

Neither of them hold back. They trade blows, each spilling blood, each bruising the other. Both of their moves are damn near flawless. They are more evenly matched than they ever were before, and it's evident in the way they move across the room, neither gaining or giving any ground…

But something *is* different. Oliver has more confidence, more surety that his blows are going to land, and when they do, he feels *pride*. Vicious, ugly *pride* that he's hurting this man. And as the fight continues, Malcolm's moves slowly become more and more imperfect, less sure, more powered by emotion than any other time Oliver's faced him. It strikes Oliver as they trade blows that Malcolm is scared - he knows he dies in the future, and he needs to know *how*, so he can prevent it. His entire existence is built on survival, and knowing that it's all for naught has to be debilitating…

Malcolm's misstep was using Oliver's daughter to get around it.

He was going to *kidnap* his daughter.

The thought is an ugly reminder and it no longer matters that this man is the father of his best friend, or his sister's blood parent. Oliver doesn't care what Malcolm means to his mother, what might happen if

this all goes wrong - he just doesn't *care*, because the only thing that matters is keeping this monster away from his family.

Felicity is still unconscious - because of him - and Ellie's gut-wrenching sobs still echo in his ears - because of him.

Never again.

With a renewed growl, Oliver launches himself at Malcolm, more fervor than before fueling him as he hits harder and harder. His bow groans; his muscles ache with an energy-laced exhaustion that somehow gives him more adrenaline, more strength; his bones cry out when Malcolm lands a hit, but Oliver never stops, never pauses, never wanes.

They move around the room, each giving just as much as they take. Oliver nearly breaks Malcolm's arm with one hit, and a swing from Malcolm's sword slices through the strap of Oliver's quiver, sending it crashing to the ground. With each blow, Oliver feels his bow giving in more and more, and he knows it can't stand the assault much longer. He tries to disarm Malcolm as often as he can, but the other man is just too good.

But Oliver's better, because he *has* to be.

Malcolm twists, throwing Oliver's bow to the side, leaving him open. He swings his sword down, straight for Oliver's shoulder. Oliver barely gets his bow up in time to deflect him. The angle's bad, sending the sharp blade sliding against the bow edge with a sharp shriek until it hits the tip, slicing it right off. The string whips around wildly, snapping against Oliver's hands, making him hiss when it damn near cuts through the delicate skin of his fingers. Malcolm's not done though - he hits again and again, teeth gritted, desperate anger radiating from him, and Oliver blocks each one…

Until he doesn't.

His bow snaps clean in half, shattering right down the middle, and Malcolm uses the shock of it to shove his sword right for Oliver's chest.

With a strangled gasp, Oliver grabs the blade before it spears through him. He wraps his fingers around it, stopping the momentum dead in its tracks, but not before Malcolm slams him into a wall. The move sends the metal slicing through Oliver's fingers and he growls at the pain, gritting his teeth, holding the sharpened edge harder. His blood

makes it slick though and it slips; Malcolm pushing on it doesn't help anything, either.

Malcolm smiles, a garish grin that makes Oliver's stomach turn. The man's teeth are coated in blood, and a thin stream slips down his chin. "Impressive, Oliver," he says before pushing on the sword harder. Oliver groans, holding it as tightly as he can to keep it still. One wrong move and it will slide right through his chest and into his heart. "It's amazing what the right motivation can do for us as fighters, isn't it? With the right *push*…" Malcolm puts more of his weight on the sword, and the tip digs into Oliver's chest. His eyes slip shut as he gasps, barely keeping himself from crying out from the pain. "With that, we can do anything. Can't we?"

"Self-preservation gets you nothing if it means hurting the lives of innocent people," Oliver snarls. "You're a monster, Merlyn. You always have been, and you always will be."

Malcolm's face pinches with anger, but he doesn't take the bait.

"Who has who where, exactly?" he asks instead before he narrows his eyes. "We could have avoided all of this if you'd just let me have what I came for."

"You will *never* come near my daughter again," Oliver says with a savage intensity. "Or Thea."

"But we do see each other again, don't we, Oliver?" Malcolm responds, tilting his head. The blade slips in Oliver's hands again, and the tip presses into his flesh even harder. "That daughter of yours and I. In the future."

"When you attack her mother in front of her," Oliver retorts, surging forward. It sends the tip deeper into his skin, but the anger is quickly dulling the pain, making it easier to ignore as he growls, "*Again*."

"You are awfully quick to hold me accountable for things I haven't yet done," Malcolm snaps.

"They're things you'll never get the chance to do," Oliver replies, his voice lowering as he tightens his hold on the sword. He leans forward; it's suddenly a whole lot easier to ignore the metal cutting into his chest as he stares at Malcolm. "I can promise you that."

Malcolm scoffs. "And how will…"

Oliver grabs the blade and shoves the sword down, cutting the other man off. The sharp tip slices through his shirt, cutting into his chest. Oliver cries out before he wrenches the hilt up, using the element of surprise to slam the end up into Malcolm's jaw. It cracks the underside of Malcolm's face and his teeth crash together as he falls backwards, a sharp shout of pain following him.

Flipping the sword in his hands, Oliver grips the handle as tightly as he can, keeping his hands from slipping in his own blood as he moves to swing the sword down, right for Malcolm's neck… but the other man is already up and moving. Malcolm sits up, his gloved hand grabbing the bloodied blade. It cuts through the leather before he twists it, wrenching Oliver's wrist.

With a sharp cry, Oliver drops it. As Malcolm attempts to flip the sword - to swing it down and to slice through one of Oliver's tendons, he's sure of it - Oliver doubles his fists and slams them into Malcolm's temple. The dark archer's face goes slack for a split second, dazed long enough for Oliver to wrap his hand around the other man's neck and *squeeze.*

But Malcolm's too fast, too quick to recover, and Oliver's too intent on *ending* him… too intent to see the next move before it happens.

Malcolm drops, using Oliver's grip to keep him up just enough that he can turn. He rams his elbow into the side of Oliver's knee, the same knee that Slade nearly broke a few weeks before.

Pain explodes in his joint, so white hot it scorches his nerves, and with a shocked shout, Oliver lets him go before he collapses.

He groans, trying to breathe, trying to grit his teeth against the pain, but it's like lava, setting his entire leg on fire. Little white pinpricks of pain burst against his eyelids, and they only get worse when he shoves himself up, forcing himself to open his eyes. He blinks, tasting blood - he bit his tongue when he'd fallen - and it takes too long for his vision to return.

He has to keep Malcolm in his sights - he can't let him go, he *can't.*

It's only a split second that Oliver's down, but a split second is all the dark archer needs.

When Oliver finds him again, he stops breathing - no, *everything* stops. The air freezes around him, his lungs seize, his heart stutters to a standstill. Every single molecule around him is stock-still, focused on

the scene before him.

"No," Oliver gasps, shoving himself up to his knees. His injured one instantly gives out and he collapses again, barely catching himself with his hands. The bright white carpet digs into the wounds on his palms and fingers, and it's the only other thing he can feel save for the *fear*. "Malcolm, *please*-"

Malcolm's kneeling on the ground, holding Felicity's unconscious form in his arms. Her limbs dangle like a broken doll's, her head bent painfully to the side where Malcolm had shoved it back to expose her throat…

He has a knife, a tiny blade, and it's pressed right to Felicity's jugular.

Bile dances against the back of Oliver's throat as he pushes himself up again. He ignores the pain, shaking his head, every single cell in his body screaming at him to get her away from this monster.

"*Malcolm*…" he pleads.

"I told you, Oliver…" Malcolm starts. He's already exerting enough pressure against her throat that he's cut through the thin skin there. A tiny drop of her blood stains the sharp blade; it leaks down her neck, her chest, until it's spreading across her tank top. "I will do anything."

Oh God, oh God, no… please…

"Let her go," Oliver chokes out, putting his hands up. Blood coats his hands, making them feel *hot*, like his skin's covered in acid. "Please. Don't… Take me, Malcolm, don't… Not her."

"You're missing the point, Oliver," Malcolm says, his voice oddly calm, oddly detached. But there's still a hint of pity there, and it makes Oliver's insides twist. Is it pity that he's going to take *both* of them, just to keep Oliver in-line? Or is it because he's going to cut her throat right there, right in front of him? Oh *God*, he wouldn't survive that. "You always let your emotions cloud your judgment. It's why I won before, and why I'll win now."

"No," Oliver whispers.

Not her, please not her.

His hands are shaking - no, every inch of him is shaking. He's starkly aware of the blood snaking its way down his forearms as he stays right

where he is, unable to take his eyes off Felicity. He's afraid if he makes one move, Malcolm will kill her. Because he knows Malcolm, he recognizes this desperation - he's going to do anything, just like he said, and he doesn't care about the consequences. Maybe Malcolm has it right, only caring about himself, not caring about what happens to anyone around him. Maybe it's easier to be shut off, just like Oliver had tried to do when he first came back, because at least then… at least then he wouldn't feel like his soul was being ripped to shreds as he watches her blood slowly leak down her throat.

"Malcolm," he tries again, but he has nothing to say. What *can* he say? He can't give up Felicity, but he can't give up Ellie. Oliver's barely breathing as he whispers, "Please."

Malcolm ignores him.

The dark archer stands, stumbling slightly, but he never lets Felicity go. He drags her up with him, and the way her head and arms swing has nausea pounding through Oliver's stomach. God, if something *more* happened to her from this, if he hurt her more…

None of this would matter if she was gone.

No, he can't even think about that possibility.

"Stay back," Malcolm orders, inching towards the door. "Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Oliver doesn't move, not an inch. Even as he surveys the scene, even as his mind catalogues the various ways he can get the upper hand on Malcolm, he doesn't move, because the what-if of any move he makes is too devastating.

"Momma!"

Ellie's voice is like a vicious ray of light slicing through the darkness.

Oliver instinctively lurches to the side, right for his daughter, the urge to protect at least one of them nearly taking over, but his eyes never leave Felicity.

Malcolm makes the mistake of doing that very thing.

He twists, his eyes finding Ellie where she's hovering in the doorway, gripping the doorjamb, her eyes huge and horrified, glued to Felicity as Cisco and Caitlin run up behind her…

It's all Oliver needs, that split second of distraction, and he lunges for Malcolm.

Pain rips through his leg, and his anguished cry has Malcolm turning back to him but he's too late. Oliver tackles him, shoving him back. Felicity slips from his grasp, falling to the ground in an ungraceful heap. Oliver's heart screams at him to go back, to make sure she's okay, but the threat is still here, and it's a threat he has to *eliminate*. There's a new fury in Oliver that wasn't there before. This man was going to take his daughter away from him, his sister… and now he just threatened the woman Oliver loves more than life itself, held a knife to her throat, made her *bleed*.

He hurt the wrong woman. And he will absolutely regret it.

With a roar that comes from deep inside his chest, Oliver pummels Malcolm, putting everything he has left into it. Malcolm defends himself as best he can, but he's no match for Oliver's ferocity, he can't be. He made a grave, *grave* mistake trying to use Felicity, and Oliver's dead set on making him *pay*. Dimly, Oliver hears Ellie's shouts, and the muffled sounds of shushing and other voices - maybe even people shouting, he's not sure.

All he sees - all he *feels* - is the satisfying wet sound of Malcolm's face breaking under his hand.

Before his mind can catch up, Oliver grips the front of Malcolm's jacket and spins, throwing him into the dresser. He doesn't give the other man a chance to do anything before he's on him. Oliver pins him to the wall, narrowly missing the arrows already buried there. He wraps his hand around Malcolm's neck, pressing his thumb to the tender spot just under his chin, pressing his fingers against Malcolm's rapid pulse…

Malcolm freezes, letting out a stuttered breath.

They both know with one move, Oliver could snap his neck right then.

It all happens so fast, so damned fast, that when they both finally stop, Oliver feels faint from the adrenaline and *hate* racing through his veins. The atmosphere in the room shifts, and they all feel it. Oliver barely catches Caitlin's, "Oh my god," and he glances back long enough to see the doctor disappearing with Ellie in her arms.

That his daughter is no longer there, that she won't have to watch what he's about to do, it makes it all the more *real*. It makes him want

it more.

He tightens his grip.

"Oliver," Malcolm gasps. He grapples with Oliver's tattered, blood-soaked shirt, trying to find something to hold onto, something to give him leverage, but he's too weak. *Beaten*. His voice is strained and wet with blood, his lips coated in it. A light breeze from the open window washes over them - it's the very window Malcolm had snuck into, the one he'd been about to jump out of with Ellie in his arms. "You don't want to do this."

"No," Oliver says, shaking his head slowly, his eyes never leaving Malcolm's. "I do."

And he does, oh God he does, so badly he can *taste* it.

"I'm your sister's father," Malcolm manages, a desperate bid for clemency.

That almost gives Oliver pause… *almost*. It's not enough though. That's fixable with Thea. He has to believe that. And, if not… at least she'll be alive. She'll get to live her life on her own terms, without the dark, twisted shadow of her father hanging over her. She might never look at Oliver the same again, not like she used to, before all of this…

But the thought of living his life looking over his shoulder, always wondering if yet *another* threat is behind them, is after his daughter, all while knowing that this son of a bitch *does* get to his family eventually, *does* almost take his wife's life, *does* almost kill his unborn son in the process…

It's too much, and he can't risk it.

There's always a cost to changing the timeline, isn't there? Maybe this is his… and right now, as steep as the price is, it's one he's willing to live with.

"She'll never forgive you," Malcolm says. His voice grows heavier, more edged as he adds, "Not ever."

"I know," Oliver replies, nearly choking on the words. Still, they're simple, clean, solemn… and full of an understanding that he never, ever wanted to experience, the knowledge that he might very well push his sister away forever by doing this.

But there's no other way.

Malcolm's eyes widen in horror when he sees that realization reflected back at him in Oliver's eyes. He shakes his head, digging his fingers into Oliver's shirt, trying to push him away, but Oliver barely feels him. The only thing he does feel is the slight pull of his muscles as he reaches out and yanks an arrow out of the wall…

Oliver rams the arrow into Malcolm's throat as hard as he can.

It slices clean through, driving right through his jugular, cutting it in half. Blood spurts as Malcolm's hands fly to cover the wound, his fingers grappling with the arrow shaft, trying to pull it out, but it's futile…

Oliver just watches him, not moving as Malcolm stares back. The life slowly drains from his face, the light in his eyes fading as he dies… as he *finally* dies…

Malcolm falls back against the wall, his hands still clasped to his throat… and then as if a switch goes off, his limbs jerks one last time before he's gone. The body slides down the clean, white wall, leaving a trail of smeared blood.

The room is silent. Nobody moves, nobody breathes.

It's done.

Oliver closes his eyes, bowing his head…

"*No!*"

The scream pierces the air. It hits Oliver like a freight train, shattering the quiet of the moment, leaving nothing but the thunder of his heart suddenly pounding away.

No.

Thea.

Oliver spins towards the door, instantly stepping forward, putting his hands up, putting himself between her and the body behind him, but it's too late.

She saw it, she saw all of it.

He doesn't even comprehend that she's up and awake, that she's okay,

because all he sees is the shock on her face, the horror slowly twisting her features as she stares at Malcolm. The man Oliver just killed.

Oliver suddenly can't *breathe*.

Thea's face slowly transforms, melting from shock to horror before finally settling on something else entirely. It's a kind of ire he's never seen her wear, a look he's never seen *anyone* wear. It's completely foreign on her face, so much so that he feels like he's looking at someone he's never met before.

"No…" she gasps, her lips pulling back in a snarl. It's a stark contrast to the incredible grief in her voice, and for the first time, Oliver realizes what he's done. What she *saw* him do.

"Thea," he whispers. He steps towards her, putting his hands up. They're covered in blood, both his and Malcolm's. The thought of that is unsettling, but the visual is absolutely horrific. He pulls his hands away, moving closer to her. "I didn't have a choice. I didn't…"

She doesn't let him finish.

Thea screams, a primal sound of anger and pain that rattles him to his very core before she launches herself at him. He shouts her name, moving to grab her, but she's fast, faster than he could have ever anticipated. And it's only when she's about to reach him that he realizes how *tired* he is, how hard it is to lift his limbs to protect himself, especially from his *sister*.

"Please…" he implores, but it falls on deaf ears.

Her fist hits his jaw with surprising force, sending him careening backwards. Oliver falls back against the bed, his knees giving out on him, sending him falling to the floor again. The ache in his knee matches the ache in his jaw as he barely keeps himself from colliding full-force with the floor again. Oliver grabs the edge of the sheet, leaving bloody smears everywhere as he pulls himself back up.

"Thea…"

"Murderer!" she cries. She tries hitting him again but he dodges her, throwing his hands up to ward her off, but it's useless as she stalks after him. Her voice pierces his ears as she continues, "I hate you! I *hate* you! You're a liar. A *killer*. You've taken *everything* away from me, and you deserve it all back on you. *All of it*!"

Her words hit him hard, harder than her fist did. She doesn't give him a chance to do anything, much less say anything, before she throws herself at him again.

Oliver grabs her arms, shouting her name, trying to fend her off, but she's strong… She's *too* strong. She's stronger than she should be, hitting him harder than makes sense. Malcolm had been right - Thea isn't the world-savvy person her brother and father are, or even her mother. She's a teenager who's always been more interested in fashion trends than fighting techniques, which means…

No.

But it also makes *sense*. It makes sense that Isabel would do something like this, that she would *poison* his sister.

Oliver's frozen, trying to process this, trying to find a way around it, another explanation…

Thea uses the temporary reprieve to shove him backwards. He goes flying, crashing into a wall. The plaster shatters, his body leaving a huge dent behind him. Oliver struggles to breathe, to *move*, looking up in time to see Thea stepping over Felicity's prone body and coming straight for him.

She's *manic*; insane. Her body is tensed, shaking, like she's waiting to be attacked even though she's the one advancing. She's angry, scared, inexperienced… it's a terribly volatile combination that's primed to explode.

The reality of what he's seeing hits him like a blast of ice water, sluicing down his spine, leaving an ugly chill in its wake.

Because there's only one way Thea is this angry, this powerful.

And it's the very last thing he could ever have wanted for his little sister.

"Thea," he rasps, holding his hands up to ward her off as he pushes himself to his feet again. "This isn't you."

It suddenly hits him that his mother was watching her, that the last time he saw Moira Queen she had been sitting in an easy-chair next to Thea, holding her hand, both of them looking so peaceful. The thought that Thea might have done something to her makes him revolt, but he bites it back, forcing himself back to *this* moment.

"Thea, you're… you're infected, okay? You're not *you*."

"No, *you're* the infection," she snaps. There's vitriol in her voice, so much it makes him shiver. She grabs the tatters of his ruined t-shirt into tight fists and spins him away from the wall, like he weighs nothing. He's honestly not sure if it's her words or the movement that has his insides lurching. "You're a murderer. You *murdered* him!"

He grabs her shoulders, trying to ground her, but the instant he touches her, he knows it's useless. She's shaking - with *rage* - and her skin is too hot. She's red-faced, her mouth covered in spittle.

Oliver holds her tighter, digging his fingers into her muscle - he needs this to *stop*, for just one second. It's too much, too much is happening all at once. How had everything been so *wonderful* a few minutes ago, only to fall apart so quickly? He couldn't do it all. He couldn't protect everyone - Felicity, Ellie, his mother, Thea… and Diggle? Frank? Where are they? He can't *think*, he can't process all of this… so he holds onto the one thing he can, in this very moment. He can't lose his baby sister. He can't lose any of them, but right now, he focuses on Thea. On *saving* Thea, because there's no other choice to make. He *has* to save her.

Thea digs her nails into his chest, right into an open wound, making him hiss as she tries to break free from his hold, but he doesn't let her go, not for a second.

"No!" Oliver shakes her, almost too hard as he growls, "I was protecting my family, Thea. I was protecting you!"

"You only care about yourself," Thea spits, and with more power than he can fathom, she pushes him back. And then she's rushing him.

She's more fury than finesse, but the mirakuru flooding her system makes up for all of it. It's disconcerting seeing that rage twisting her face… the sweet little girl who used to follow him everywhere, who used to idolize him, who he nicknamed Speedy because she was always there, rushing around, never slowing down… the girl he sat through tea parties with and drove to sleepovers and helped teach to swim…

It's her… but it's not.

The mirakuru has taken over.

Tears blur Oliver's vision as he croaks out, "*Thea*," but she's not

listening.

He blocks her first two hits, wild swipes at his face, but her third hits him in the gut. It sucks the air right out of his lungs as he falls backwards, again. His body curls down to protect himself instinctively before self-preservation kicks in. He stands, moving to defend himself, but it's not enough. Thea doesn't relent, kicking him, *hard*, hard enough that it knocks him back a few feet, nearly stumbling over Felicity.

That makes him pause. The thought that Thea might miss him, might accidentally hit Felicity... that has his limbs moving faster than before, blocking her next three punches. He's moving, pushing her away from Felicity, and before he can stop himself, he hits his sister back, his fist colliding with her jaw. Thea cries out, instantly collapsing to the floor. Mirakuru or not, there's no taking a punch if you're not ready for it, and she wasn't.

Oliver's chest tightens as he scrambles to her side with a desperate, "Oh God," but she's already sitting up. Blood drips from the corner of her mouth - blood *he* spilt - and she wipes it away, smearing it over her cheek as she stands. He tries to grab her hand, to bring her back, but she's already out of reach. Oliver doesn't move, stays right where he's kneeling on the floor. She looks at the blood on her hand and he just watches her, his heart breaking. When she looks at him again, it's with a betrayal that will be burned in his mind for days and months and years to come. His face crumples. "Thea…"

"You're a monster," she snarls. "You aren't my brother. He died, because of *you*. You took him away from me, just like you killed *him*." She points at Malcolm's body with a shaking hand. "You stole *everything* from me!"

A broken gasp sounds through the room, and it takes him a second to realize he's the one making it. He can't take this, not from her. Not when she sounds like every awful thing he's ever thought about himself.

"I'm going to kill you," Thea promises, fury making her voice tremble. "Just like you killed my family."

"Please," he whispers, because he can't hear this. He *can't*. A tear slips from the corner of his eye as he implores, "Thea, this isn't you. You're sick, this isn't… You don't mean that. *Please*."

But she doesn't want to listen. She lunges for him again, and the only

difference is he doesn't stop her this time. Thea wraps her hands around his throat, her nails digging in, her eyes widening with an intent that he'll be fighting to get out of his head for the rest of his life. His hands fly to her wrists, instinct making him try to push her away, but she's strong… so strong. And it's *worse* because he knows what mirakuru can do, what it will do… This is just the beginning, and he finds himself powerless to stop it.

"Thea!"

His mother's voice echoes from the doorway. *She's okay.* His relief that she's alive is short-lived though, because his sister doesn't heed her. Thea just squeezes harder. Oliver tells himself to fight, to push her away, but he can't. Because she's Thea, and he's already hurt her so much…

Black spots dance over his eyes, clouding everything but her.

He whispers her name, staring into her eyes.

A stranger stares back at him.

There's a shout, a scramble of people in the background, the far-off sounds of his daughter crying, shouting for him and for her aunt… She heard Thea, she knows Thea's here…

And then a shot rings out.

The bullet hits Thea in the arm, sending blood spraying across Oliver's face. The shock of the pain and the power of it sends Thea flying backwards, and the second her hands are off him, Oliver inhales sharply. He chokes on the air, gasping, struggling to stay upright as Thea stands again, staring at her bloody wound.

Oliver looks back in time to see his mother's trembling hand holding a gun. Her voice is unsteady as she lowers the pistol, saying, "I love you, Thea, but I can't let you hurt your brother." She glances at Oliver before finding Thea again. "Frank has called ARGUS and Ms. Lance. They are on their way. He found Mr. Diggle."

What did *that* mean?

"You shot me," Thea says, her voice guttural and ugly. "And you think I'm the sick one?"

"You are sick," Moira replies. "Let us help you."

"I don't need your help," Thea snaps. "You're just as bad as he is."

"Thea," his mother whispers. "Please."

"You're a *liar*. A lying murderous whore. You're a coward. *Weak*." Thea shifts, but not towards Oliver. This time it's towards Moira. Oliver's blood runs cold as she growls, "You're nothing, just like *he* said you were. I hate you, I *hate*…"

Another shot rings out.

Oliver sits up with a heavy, "No!" but it's not a bullet. It's a tranquilizer, from Cisco, but his aim is off. Thea flinches, and it's just enough for the tiny arrow to sail right past her, sinking into the wall. Oliver hadn't even realized Cisco had left to grab it, but he's so damn grateful - Oliver can't overpower her, but if they can get her down long enough to give her Cisco's newest attempt at the cure… That spurs Oliver into action and he lunges for her. If he can hold her down long enough, just to get her sedated again… "Get another one!" he snaps before he swings his leg out, taking Thea's feet out from under her.

She lands with a solid oomph, but she doesn't need long to recover. One second she's on her back and the next she's up and tackling Oliver again.

The siblings vie for control, a tumble of limbs as they try to pin each other against the floor. She's all knees and elbows, always has been, and the sharp edges of her joints keep slamming home, knocking Oliver off-center. He's bigger, and normally he's stronger, but he's no match for her with mirakuru in her system. Oliver shouts, "Now! Now!" but when her hands wrap around his neck again, when they don't get the tranquilizer ready in time…

Two more shots ring out, this time from Frank, who has finally shown up, and they land true, slamming into Thea.

Blood blossoms across her shirt, spreading outward quickly. It's not enough to take her down, but it does shock her, just enough for Oliver to throw her off. Gasping for air, Oliver scrambles up, shoving Thea onto her stomach. He pulls her arms behind her back, twisting them as he shoves his injured knee into the small of her back.

She growls, thrashing against his hold.

"Now, Cisco!" Oliver orders.

But Cisco doesn't get the chance to get near them.

Thea's too strong to be held for long, even after taking three bullets. She bucks Oliver off and scrambles to the far side of the room, some wild sense of self-preservation telling her that she can't win here. She skids to a stop by Malcolm - his body is slumped over, a thick pool of blood staining the wall and the carpet, framing him grotesquely. Thea spins to keep them all in her line of sight. She steps through Malcolm's blood, and the squishing sound it makes has Oliver's stomach turning.

She's staring at the tranquilizer gun in Cisco's hand, eyes darting to the very real one in Frank's.

"Thea," Oliver whispers again, holding his hands up in supplication. His voice is worn and damaged from her grip. "Please." It feels like the only thing he can say anymore.

But she isn't hearing him. She isn't *seeing* him, she suddenly isn't seeing any of them. She's looking right past Oliver, at something only she can see. Oliver shakes his head - she's hallucinating. She has to be - but whatever she sees, whatever she hears… it tells her something that makes her look at the window.

"No," he gasps, trying to stand, but it's like the entire night has finally caught up with him. Pain cripples him, his feet faltering beneath him. "Don't!"

Thea vaults out the window without a single glance back.

"No!" Oliver shouts, forcing himself to move, to go after her.

He reaches the window, looking out… but she's gone. She disappears, like a shadow in the night, leaving behind nothing but bloody smears on the flagstones outside the window and the shattered pieces of his sister.

"No…" Oliver grips the window sill, his eyes searching the darkness. "Thea!"

His voice echoes through the night, but nothing comes back. It suddenly doesn't matter that he's probably got a broken rib, or that he's bleeding from too many wounds, or that he feels like he's gone to war and back all in one night. He can't leave his sister out there. Oliver's grip tightens and he has every intention of following her when something stops him.

"No, I want down!" *Ellie*. Her little voice echoes from down the hallway, her tears garbling the words. He doesn't remember her leaving, but he's damn grateful. God, he hopes she didn't see anything. He'd been so intent on taking Malcolm out, he hadn't even *thought* about who else was with him. "I want my Daddy! I want my Momma!" A soft shushing noise prefaces her voice growing louder as she yells, "Aunt Thea!"

His sister's name on her lips makes his chest burn and Oliver closes his eyes, his head bowing. He doesn't move though, he doesn't go back to Ellie, not yet. He opens his eyes, scanning the world outside this house. It's so *normal*, so full of life - he can hear everyone going about their business, living their lives. None of these people just killed a man in cold blood with his daughter right there, and none of them just drove their sister away in a mirakuru-laced rage. None of them have blood-coated hands and none of them are standing in-between two worlds - one where he goes back to Felicity, to his daughter, and the other where he goes after his sister. None of them face a decision that feels like he has to pick one over the other.

"Thea," he whispers, staring at the other houses, into the surrounding darkness. Tears burn his eyes, tears of failure and grief, of guilt and horror… of regret. "Please don't go."

He urges her to appear, but she doesn't.

She's gone… and Oliver can't escape the feeling that she's taken part of him with her.

He's digging his fingers into the sill so hard some part of him is afraid he's going to break a bone. Oliver's not sure if he's clinging to it to keep himself from leaving, or to keep himself from going.

The decision is taken away from him when he hears Caitlin's sharp, "Ellie, no!" before a solid thud sounds that is the tell-tale sign of his daughter's feet hitting the ground. And then she's running back into the room.

Not in here, no. Not with Malcolm laid out, not with the room basically destroyed, the place that was supposed to be their sanctuary, the place where a bad man had appeared and almost taken her - *again*.

Will he ever be able to keep her safe?

"Daddy!"

"Ellie," Oliver chokes out, spinning away from the window. The need to hold her takes over everything as he leaps away from Malcolm and around Felicity, just in time for her to barrel into the room. It's partly the desire to feel her in his arms, to know she's *okay*, and partly to protect her from the ugliness around them. Ellie pushes past Moira, past Cisco and Frank, and aims straight for him.

She's a mess - her face is splotchy from crying, her hair frizzy and wild, her shirt stained with snot and tears. Oliver drops to the ground, hissing at the pain in his knee before he swoops her up against his chest.

He doesn't touch her with his hands, he can't do that, but he does hold her, wrapping her up in his arms as hard as he dares. She's sobbing again, holding onto him just as hard, almost like she's trying to crawl inside him. Words tumble from her mouth but he can't understand a single thing she says. All he can do is hold her, whispering, "Shh, baby, shh," over and over.

It's not long before Oliver finally lets himself collapse. He holds Ellie even closer, burying his face in her hair, a stilted sob falling from his lips. He'd almost lost her, he'd almost lost it *all*. He can't even begin to fathom what it would've been like to walk into the room and find her *gone*…

Was that why he'd lost Thea? Because he'd saved Ellie?

Grief rips him up from the inside out.

Oliver cradles Ellie against him, his shoulders shaking as he cries into his daughter's hair. He's painfully mindful of the drying blood on his hands, of the fact that he can't fully hold her. It's not disgust that he feels though; he doesn't regret killing Malcolm. He stands behind that, and he will until his own time comes.

But everything that came with it… the price they all had to pay…

Felicity.

Oh god.

With a heaving gasp, Oliver looks up. He presses Ellie's face into his chest, shielding her as he looks back to find Caitlin and Cisco are checking on her. He can't tell if she's breathing, he can't tell *anything*.

He turns back to the doors, looking for Moira. His mother is hugging

herself, her face wet with tears, her body shaking with her own sobs. She's standing near the door, staring at him holding Ellie. He knows she's thinking about Thea, about everything that just happened, about the fact that they lost her again. He can't go there, not right now, especially with Felicity still unconscious.

"Mom," he croaks. He shifts Ellie, moving to stand up but his knee stops him. "Can you… can you take her? Please?"

She nods soundlessly, moving forward. They work together to keep Ellie away from the horror in the room, but the second she's about to leave Oliver's embrace, Ellie grabs the tattered remains of his shirt, holding on for dear life.

"No, Daddy, no!"

"Ellie, sweetie," he says, looking down at her. "It's okay…" The words die in his throat when he sees the blood from his chest on her cheek and forehead, staining her t-shirt. He bites his lip so hard he tastes blood. "Go with… go with Grandma, okay? It's okay."

"No, I don't wanna go, Daddy! No!"

Oliver shushes her, whispering, "It's okay, sweetie, it's okay." He moves to touch her face, but his bloodied fingers stop him. He squeezes his eyes shut before looking at Moira. "Mom, please-"

"C'mere, honey," Moira says softly, grabbing Ellie with as much strength as she can manage. It's enough to haul her up, but Ellie doesn't let go of Oliver's shirt, not until she no longer has a choice, nearly ripping the rest of it. "It's alright, sweetheart, it's…"

"No!" Ellie shouts. "Daddy!"

Her cries cut through him. "Ellie…"

Moira doesn't waste any time. She holds Ellie's face pressed into her throat, nearly running from the room, his daughter's sobs following after her. Frank is quick to follow them. His face is pinched with sorrow, his voice low as he says, "I've got them, sir. And Mr. Diggle," before he takes after them. Oliver doesn't have a chance to decipher what that means because Ellie's still calling after him.

"Don't leave me, Daddy, don't leave!"

With a pained moan, Oliver manages, "I'm here, I'm right here," after

her, but his voice is dulled, damn near broken from Thea's grip. Ellie's sobs finally fade and he groans, burying his face in his hands.

Is that what happened when she came to this time? Was his future self in danger or…?

But he can't let himself think about that.

Just as Thea took a piece of him with her, Ellie does as well, leaving the rest for…

"*Felicity*."

There's no time for injuries, no time for pain as he moves towards her. He reaches her feet first and he grabs her ankle - she's *warm*, which is a good sign, right? But she's still not *moving*.

"Is she…?" he croaks, moving up her body, keeping his hand on her. It forces Caitlin to fall back, to make room for him as he kneels next to Felicity's prone form. She's not *moving*. Desperation floods him, and his voice grows louder as he asks, "Is she okay? Is she…?"

"She's breathing," Caitlin instantly replies, moving so she's on Felicity's other side with Cisco.

Felicity's so still, and it's probably because his own breathing is so jagged and his hand's shaking that he can't see her chest moving. Oliver presses his hand over her heart, needing to feel *something*.

"Her pulse is strong," Caitlin continues. "She's as okay as… as I can tell. For right now at least."

For right now.

They don't know what's wrong with her, because she's not waking up.

"God," Oliver breathes. More tears blur his vision before he finally - *finally* - feels her heart beating against his palm. It's slow, very slow, but it's there. His face crumples and he leans over her, moving to cradle her face. He doesn't care about the blood marring his skin, not with her. He runs his fingers over her nose, underneath her eye. He just needs to touch her…

No, what he needs is for her to wake up.

"Open your eyes, Felicity," he whispers, stroking her cheek. "Please. Please, baby…"

She doesn't move.

"Why isn't she waking up?" Oliver demands. "Why isn't…"

"Here," Cisco interrupts. Oliver swings his head over to find the other man holding Felicity's arm up, pointing at a puncture mark on her shoulder, like she'd been injected with something. "I don't see a syringe anywhere, maybe he…" Cisco points uncomfortably at Malcolm's still form. "Maybe he still has it on him. But we'll run some tests, we'll…"

The rest of his words are quickly drowned out by a sudden bleak white noise filling Oliver's hears. He stares at the mark in her arm. *Poison*. She was poisoned. That son of a bitch… God, he wants to bring Merlyn back to life just to kill him all over again. He wants it so bad he feels the murderous desire to go to his already broken body and break it more, break it until there's nothing left, because that's what that monster *deserves*.

But a larger part of him can't let her go.

Oliver cups her face, gasping her name as he looks at her. Her lips have lost some of their color and her features are stark…

She's barely breathing.

He can't lose her, too, he *can't*.

"Please, honey, please… Please wake up."

She doesn't though.

A heart-rending sob tears from his throat. Oliver wraps her up in his arms, pulling her up off the floor. He cradles the back of her head, holding her as close as he can as he shoves his face into her neck, breathing her in.

When she doesn't hold him back, when she doesn't wake up, that's when he completely breaks.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

> Thank you to hotcookinmama for filling in as a beta this chapter while alizziebyanyothername was at ComicCon! Also, thank you as always to J_Sevick for her unwavering support and keen eye.
>
> So much love for all of our wonderful readers! The response to chapter 30 was absolutely astounding. Enjoy this chapter, you guys! <3

Consciousness finds her in bits and pieces.

The first time she tries to move - to open her eyes, to speak, to do *anything* - it's like she can't quite reach her body. Darkness slowly recedes, letting the world come back to life around her. As Felicity struggles to rejoin it, a light grows brighter from behind her eyelids, an orange hue that floods her field of vision. There's a steady beeping noise and voices… somewhere. They're all far away, like they're echoing from across a great canyon.

"*Can you hear me? Felicity?*"

Warmth fills her. She knows that voice, knows it as well as she knows her own.

"*Felicity? Are you…?"*

It's strained with sadness, jagged with a fear that makes her heart hurt. She wants to answer him, wants to see him, smile at him, calm the edge of anxiety that stains his voice. But her tongue is heavy and her eyelids won't move.

"*Honey, squeeze my hand if you can hear me… Felicity…* please."

She tries to say his name, to tell him she's there, that she's okay, but the letters won't form.

"*Please…*"

He whispers it over and over, and his desperation makes her want to cry. *I'm here, I'm here…* Every ounce of will she has, every iota of concentration goes to her fingers. It's a monumental effort to do anything at all - something that would be terrifying if she were awake

enough to register how serious the implications of that might be.

In the end, she barely manages to twitch her pointer finger against his familiar, roughly calloused palm.

"*Oh God, Felicity? Thank God. Can you hear me? Caitlin! She's...*"

Yes, I'm here, I'm right here…

But the words fade away as she slips back toward oblivion, her world disappearing into an all-consuming darkness. It's too much. She's not ready, not yet, despite how much she wants to be.

The next time, she manages to peek her eyes open. It's not much, just a tiny window in her field of vision, but it feels like a triumph anyhow. Her glasses are off and the world's a familiar blur, like she's looking through the distortion of a shower door. Despite that, she'd recognize the figure slumped next to the bed anywhere.

Oliver.

Her mind is as foggy as her eyesight and nothing quite makes sense. What *happened*? She tries to ask it, tries to make a noise - *any* noise - but her throat is as dry as sandpaper and her tongue feels glued in place. Felicity's far more aware of her inability to do anything this time, and it has a dull stab of panic shooting through her chest. Why can't she *move*?

She tries to open her eyes more, vaguely hearing a sharp beeping sound suddenly spike as she looks around.

And then she finds him again.

Oliver.

He's here. The panic eases, his presence soothing her. If he's here, then everything's okay.

She focuses on her fingers again, like last time. Oliver's hand is curled around hers. His grip is lax in sleep, but his touch is constant. She hums with affection - at least she thinks she does - and *moves*. Her fingers unfurl against his palm. Felicity rejoices with a little burst of victory and does it again.

His skin is rougher than she'd expected. Had he hurt his hand? She frowns, trying to say his name, but her brain is completely

disconnected from her mouth. Is that a bandage her fingers edge along?

All her efforts don't amount to much. Oliver simply mumbles in his sleep, his hand tightening around hers. He's aware of her, but he's still lost to the world of dreams. And, despite her willpower, it's only a matter of seconds before she joins him. As she falls back to sleep, she manages to whisper his name. It's barely audible, barely a gasp, but he still somehow hears it. The last thing she hears is her name on his lips.

The third time is different. The third time is better.

Felicity blinks her eyes open, moaning when she sees the blurry brightness of the room. She grimaces, squinting, trying to orient herself. She's in a bed, in a room - a very, very *bright* room - and she's not alone.

Oliver.

She lets out a breathy whimper.

"Felicity."

She sighs, turning towards him as he jolts up from his chair. Oliver kneels next to the bed, grasping her hand and the feel of his arm and chest pressing into her is incredible - fortifying and reassuring like nothing else. Felicity squeezes his hand back as hard as she can. Her lack of strength is obvious, but that she can keep hold of him at all is enough. It's so, *so* enough. She tightens her grip on him when he gets close enough that she can see him clearly without her glasses.

Oliver brushes his hand over her forehead. "Hey…"

He's the best thing she's ever seen. Happy tears flood her vision as she tries to give him a smile. Her lips feel like tissue paper though; everything feels very dry and stuck. But that's okay, because he's here with her.

She feels like she hasn't seen him in weeks.

He must share the same sentiment because his voice cracks as he whispers, "Felicity?" She wonders if he thinks he's dreaming. He's staring at her like she might not be real.

"Hi," she manages. It feels like glass shards are cutting at her throat as she talks.

At the sound of her voice, Oliver collapses. "Oh God, Felicity," he breathes in a choked voice. His eyes are wet as he falls against her in outright relief. "Thank God," he murmurs. "I thought…" His head falls against her shoulder, and he breathes her in, squeezing her hand for a long moment. She turns, pressing her face into his hair as much as she can before he's suddenly pushing himself up off his knees. His grimace is obvious, like he got hurt, but he doesn't give her a second to fully comprehend that before he's sitting on the edge of the bed, hovering over her.

He cradles her hand in his lap as he touches her with his other one. He actually shakes, tremoring fingertips skating along the length of her brow, the curve of her cheekbone until he moves to cup her face with both hands. His thumbs run over her cheeks and across the sensitive skin under her eyes.

Oliver whispers her name again - a mixture of amazement, fear, love and regret darken his eyes - and this time a tear does fall.

It soaks into the collar of the t-shirt she's wearing. Some part of her recognizes it as one of his.

Felicity tries to say his name, but all she can manage is mouthing it.

"Shh," he whispers. "You're okay."

Something bad happened. But what? For the first time since she's become aware of the world around her, Felicity realizes she can't remember anything. It feels just out of reach, like it's hovering on the edges of her memory. But she doesn't need the details - his reaction is more than enough to scare her, to drive home that *whatever* it was had been very serious.

Her lips move, just enough to form his name again before she gets out a ragged, "What…"

The words she means to say dissolve into a coughing fit that *hurts*. Her lungs seize with pain as the full extent of her body's status hits her. She *aches*, muscles screaming like they're suffering from disuse, and her throat feels like she swallowed lemon juice with a million paper cuts slicing up her esophagus.

"Easy, easy," Oliver says. "Don't try to talk, honey. Give it a minute. Let me get you some water."

Felicity nods, and he kisses her forehead before practically bolting for

their bathroom, stopping long enough to grab an empty glass from the nightstand. Their nightstand. Their bathroom… It's *their* room, she realizes. They're at the manor. They hadn't been here, she thinks. They'd been…

Oliver's back an instant later, offering her the water.

"Here," he says softly, sitting on the edge of the bed again as he helps her sit up. It doesn't escape her attention that he's been limping - really, that he's trying to hide it and failing miserably - or that he's wearing bandages on his hands. He slips his arm around her, his hand slipping up under her shirt, and his bandages scrape against her skin as he helps her put the glass to her lips.

She's so incredibly weak it's ridiculous. And she's *thirsty*. She doesn't drink much - even a sip feels foreign - and it burns as it runs down her throat. It does help though, and after a moment she feels like maybe she can actually speak more than one word.

"Oliver…"

"I'm here," he whispers, rubbing her back, putting the glass back down. "I've got you."

"What happened?" she asks, slipping her hand back into his.

The sight of an IV in the back of her hand is jarring, as is the presence of other tubes going to places under the blanket. A catheter, surely, and there are wires connected to a heart monitor - that was the beeping. All of this for her? Why?

It's an answer she can really live without for a moment when she sees Oliver's hand. He has bandages across the palm, some wrapped around a few fingers. Felicity tugs on his other arm until he relents, giving her both hands. They're *both* bandaged. She'd been right earlier, he'd gotten hurt. But she can't remember *how* for the life of her.

Running her fingers over the white gauze, Felicity's voice is a mess of guttural croaks as she whispers, "Are you okay?"

"I am now. God…" He gives a soft, disbelieving laugh and shakes his head. He wraps his hands around hers and brings them up to his lips. "You scared the hell out of me."

"What happened?"

Oliver keeps her hands pressed to his lips, shaking his head again before whispering, "It doesn't matter." She frowns, but he's not done. "The only thing that matters is you're okay." He looks at her again and the lines in his face are so prominent it makes Felicity's heart stutter. He looks like he went to hell and back. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

I feel like how you look.

"I'm…" she offers weakly before her voice gives out again. Releasing one of his hands - but only one, she doesn't want to stop touching him; she *can't* - she picks up the glass from where he'd place it on the nightstand. She takes another small sip before putting it back down. "I'm okay. I think. Tired."

Oliver cracks a tiny smile but it doesn't reach his eyes.

Felicity reaches up - God, even lifting her arm is almost too much - to touch his cheek. He curls in against her, nuzzling her palm, his eyes slipping shut. "Oliver, what happened?" His response is to take a shaky breath. Felicity drops her hand because she's too weak to hold it up but she ducks her head, trying to capture his eye. "Oliver?"

"What do you remember?" he asks.

"I, uh… I don't…" Felicity furrows her brow, trying to think about the right answer. Weird soundless fog is all she can find when she tries to think about what she remembers. There are shapes… she remembers touching something… That same stab of panic is back as she says, "It's all kind of…"

Oliver frowns. "You don't remember?"

"Almost?" She closes her eyes, fighting to search her memory. "It's like it's right there, but…"

"We were at the safe house," he fills in. He searches her face. A smile tugs at his lips as he adds, "We took a shower…" His voice is soft and wistful, coloring in the missing parts of her memory as she blushes - she definitely remembers *that* part. He shifts then, and the ashen look is back. "I went to check the security system in the basement and you stayed upstairs with Ellie when-"

"Oh my God!" Felicity gasps. Panic bursts inside her as she sits up fully, ignoring the pain as she taxes her body more than she should, everything rushing back all at once. "Ellie!" Her daughter's terrified

screams echo in her head. A surge of adrenaline has her forgetting any weakness in her body as she lurches off the bed, straining the wires and tubes connected to her. "Where-"

He grabs her before she can get anywhere with a quick, "Whoa, hey, hey, she's okay." Oliver holds her - he doesn't have to hold her, not like he is. It's almost like he's afraid if he stops, she'll disappear. He points over her shoulder. "She's fine. Ellie's okay. She's right next to you."

"What?" Felicity whirls around. Ellie's fast asleep next to her, curled up on her side in a ball with a small puddle of drool trickling from her mouth. "Oh, *oh*, baby…" A half-sob falls from her throat as she reaches over, running her fingers through Ellie's curls. Oliver follows, unwilling to let her go. She doesn't mind in the least, letting it anchor her as she barely keeps herself from grabbing her daughter and pulling her into her arms. "Oh, Ellie," she whispers.

The toddler takes in tiny puffs of air, completely oblivious to the world around her, which is the way it should be. Her mouth is slightly parted, her fingers resting on the mattress in pure relaxation. It's hard for Felicity to sit like this - her muscles start to shake with exhaustion, and she's on an emotional edge she can't quite explain as she stares at Ellie.

Oliver slides his hand up her spine, moving until he's cupping the back of her neck for support.

"She…" Felicity chokes out, brushing some of Ellie's hair away from her face.

"I know," Oliver replies. He kisses the back of Felicity's shoulder, wrapping his arm around her waist. "I know."

She's okay.

It all comes back to her. Every last bit of it.

Felicity remembers with perfect clarity the moment she'd spotted Malcolm in their room. She remembers the instant she'd realized that Malcolm wasn't there for her, but for Ellie. She remembers the terror when he'd moved to grab Ellie, when she'd screamed for Oliver and the way she'd shouted when she'd covered her daughter's body with her own, a physical barrier to the imminent danger Malcolm represented.

She'd known she couldn't stop him. Not Malcolm Merlyn. Not on her own without distance and a wifi connection between them. Her only goal had been to buy time, to hold him off until Oliver got there to save Ellie. And she *had*. She remembers that very well. She'd kept him away from Ellie, using everything she could to stop him from going near her daughter. But at the time she hadn't known if it would be enough.

Had it been enough?

She remembers the prick of some kind of needle against her skin, the chilly burn of something entering her bloodstream and in the next second she'd become sluggish and weak. She'd still tried, fighting back, not willing to give in, not caring what the price would be as long as Ellie was safe.

It hadn't amounted to much though. The last thing she remembers is Malcolm tossing her aside, as if she weighed absolutely nothing, a ragdoll falling against the dresser, her forehead colliding with the edge of it and then…

Nothing.

"It's over," Oliver says, his lips moving against her shoulder. "It's over."

With a shiver that has him holding her tighter, she asks, "What happened to him? To Malcolm. What happened?"

"He's dead," Oliver replies with somber finality. His voice is oddly flat, but there's zero remorse there.

It's the last thing she's expecting to hear, but she can't deny the dark rush of pleased relief it gives her. He'd been going to hurt their daughter, she's sure of it. He *did* hurt her. He'd probably hurt Oliver, because Felicity knows with everything in her that he'd been on his way to protect them. That bastard had killed hundreds of people, including his son, for a bigger picture that'd only existed in his warped mind. And she has zero doubts that he would have found a way to use his role as Thea's father for personal gain, which very well might have been at Thea's expense. He'd *deserved* to die. Felicity squares her jaw, and her eyes never leave Ellie as she quietly says, "Good."

Oliver doesn't say anything. His only reaction is to take a shaky breath, holding her tighter.

"What…"

Her voice cracks and she inhales too sharply, sending her into another coughing fit. Felicity instantly sits up, away from Ellie so she doesn't wake her, forcing Oliver to backpedal quickly. He says something she can't hear over her hacking as he reaches for the water. She thinks she hears, "Here, baby, drink this," and then the water's in front of her.

It goes down easier this time, and her coughing stops almost instantly as the liquid soothes her raw throat.

"What did he want with her?" she croaks, turning to Oliver. Her hands are shaking - with fury, with grief, with agony - causing the remaining water in the glass to ripple uneasily. He presses his lips together tightly, staring at the glass instead of meeting her gaze. He takes it from her before it can spill and sets it down again. "He was trying to take her, Oliver. He was trying to take my baby away from me. And for what, what did he want, what was he…" It's too much. "And how did he even find us in the first place? What kind of safe house was that?" When her voice cracks this time, it's not from disuse; it's from tears. One rolls down her cheeks and it burns - her skin is so damn *dry*. Felicity wipes it away angrily, unable to stop. "Someone should really talk to that Amanda Waller about her crappy safe houses, because if Malcolm could find it, what's stopping anyone else from…"

"Felicity," Oliver interrupts, grabbing her face, forcing her to look at him. He's a blurry mess until she blinks, sending a few more tears flowing down her cheeks. God, she could have lost her little girl, and it hurts so much more because she'd truly thought they'd been safe. Oliver wipes her tears away, and it's only when she's looking at him long enough that she sees his own eyes are wet and bloodshot. "It's over, okay? He's not coming back, ever. I made sure of it. Okay? I promise."

"I believe you," she whispers, nodding rapidly. "I believe you."

Oliver holds her more protectively, shaking her a little for emphasis as he says, "I won't let anything happen to you or Ellie." The words are so very quiet, just between them, but they're said with a veracity she feels in her bones. "Ever."

Felicity nods again, because it's all she can do. There's more to his words, there's so much more happening right now that she doesn't know, that she can't grasp, but all she feels is the overwhelming urge to give into the sobs building in her chest. There hadn't been time to feel the fear and horror of what was happening when Malcolm had attacked - she'd just reacted. But now, now it's coming back like it'd

been just waiting for her to open her eyes again, waiting for her to wake up before it pushed her right back into an adrenaline-fueled sense of panic and terror.

"Oliver…" she whispers. She's *shaking*, and the more she tries to calm down, the more she tries to fight it, the worse it gets. "I almost lost her. I almost lost her, and I couldn't *do* anything… I did everything I could, Oliver, and he still…"

"Hey, no, no, no," Oliver says before pulling her fully into his arms. He holds her so tightly she can't breathe, but she doesn't care. She needs it… she needs him to never leave her side ever again. "I'm here, I'm right here. You're okay."

She's too far gone to notice he's shaking just as badly, that his voice is near a breaking point, that his hold on her is too much…

They hold each other for a long time. She pushes her face into his neck, breathing him in - he smells like sweat, like her tears, like *Oliver*. He does the same, his face smushed against her temple, his lips pressed against her hairline. He rocks her, gentle and slow, and she follows the movement, needing this just as much as he does.

Felicity isn't sure how much time passes. God, she isn't even sure what time it is, or how long she's been out. The room is light, but it's a dusky light, telling her the afternoon light is starting to die, starting to fade into night. As the time slips by, she starts to calm down. Her heart rate slows, the adrenaline leaves her, and eventually the only thing holding her up is Oliver. Felicity closes her eyes, melting against him. The only thing she can think is he's alive and breathing, that their daughter's alright… that her world is okay for the moment.

She wants it to last forever, although considering their track record, that probably won't be the case. That sends a stab of foreboding through her and she shoves it down. She's too tired, she can't comprehend what might happen next. She just needs this moment to continue forever.

"Is she okay?" Felicity finally asks. Her words are muffled against his throat. He takes a slow breath, swallowing. His neck muscles contract with each movement. Felicity sniffs, pulling back a little bit so she can speak clearer. "Ellie?"

"She's… she's fine," Oliver replies. His voice tells her the complete opposite. "She hasn't wanted to leave your side once."

That has a fresh round of tears assaulting her, but she bites them back. Blinking rapidly to keep her vision clear - as clear as it can be without her glasses - she asks, "What time is it? And when did we get back here? What happened with Queen Consolidated, I thought… I mean, the building sort of collapsed, I thought you'd be there."

"There is nothing more important than you right now," he says, almost harshly. And then his breath catches, but that's the only other indication anything is wrong before he pulls back to look at her. Felicity's muscles scream in protest as she sits up on her own, her neck even worse when she looks up at him.

The look on his face has her pausing, has a ball of lead growing in her stomach, has a chalky taste filling her mouth - all with dread.

"What is it?" she whispers.

"The building went down a week ago."

Felicity freezes. There's no way she heard that correctly. Oliver licks his lips, his eyes darting to Ellie before finding hers again.

"It's been a week, you've been out for a…" His voice. "You've been out for a week, honey."

"What?" she whispers. She frowns, shaking her head. She looks back at Ellie, as if somehow the real answer will show in how she looks, or she'll wake up and tell her she heard him wrong… but that doesn't happen. Nothing happens. They just sit there… one week in the future. Her heart stops and starts, her insides tightening with unease, with confusion. "A… a week? How has it been a week? Oliver, how…"

"He poisoned you," he replies. He's quiet, so quiet, and she almost wants to scream at him to talk louder, to just *tell her*. "And you… you wouldn't…" Oliver cuts himself off, pressing his lips together tightly. When he takes a breath, it's unsteady. His voice is worse when he finally says, "And you wouldn't wake up."

The pain in his voice slices through her. Her heart breaks, and just as quickly as the panic of the unknown had taken over her, it's gone. Every inch of her focused on the pain of the man she loves. She hates it, she hates it so much she wants to reach in and take it away from him, take it all into herself so he doesn't have to feel like that anymore.

He sighs, his shoulders falling, and she whispers, "Oh, Oliver," before

cupping his face. Her thumb brushes over his trembling lips and he grasps her hand tightly, keeping it there, kissing the soft pad of her finger.

Tears fill his eyes and he pinches them shut. He doesn't speak - he can't - and instead he kisses her thumb again, and again, before moving to each of her fingers. She lets out a soft sob, watching him, knowing he's in some weird state of shock and wonder that she can't even begin to comprehend. He kisses her palm and then her wrist before he grabs her face, pulling her towards him so he can kiss her forehead.

The soft press of his lips to her skin feels desperate, almost compulsive, like he has a deep-seated *need* to prove to himself that she's still here.

It only makes her want to cry more.

A week. One week of her being unconscious, of waiting for her to wake up, of not even knowing whether or not she would. And none of her sense of sorrow is helped by her still not knowing what happened, if he hurt more than his hands or his knee, if Ellie was injured, if everyone else is okay - she doesn't know *anything*.

His choked breath pulls her back from her thoughts.

"I thought I was going to lose everything," he confesses in a barely audible whisper directly against her skin.

And *oh* but the vulnerability in his voice strikes a chord in her. The way he says it, the way the words come out tells her everything she needs to know - it'd been bad.

With a noise that can only be described as a sob, Oliver whispers, "*Felicity*," before he moves. He drops soft kisses over her face, down her nose and over one cheek before finding her lips.

The kiss is chaste, but the way he lingers, the way his fingers dig into her, it's so much more. After a second, she kisses him back, pressing herself closer. He responds in kind, a tiny whimper slipping out before he's grabbing her even harder, holding her like he's afraid she's going to disappear. His lips move against hers, almost painfully, and she wants - no, she *needs* - to open for him, to feel him just as much as he needs to feel her, but when he lets out another whimper, when she finally feels how much he's shaking, she pulls back.

"Hey," Felicity says, her lips moving against his. "I'm okay." She strokes his stubbled cheek. She pulls back slightly to look him in the eye. His are red-rimmed and watery, and for the first time she notices just how *tired* he is. The circles under his eyes are deep, the stress lines more prominent, and he has a beard. He hasn't shaved since the attack. She doubts he's done much of anything since the attack. "I'm okay."

He nods, but his breathing is still ragged, his grip still hard. He kisses her again, once more, before pulling back and taking a deep, deep breath. When he lets it out, he practically collapses against her, and she does everything in her power to hold him up. His face slips across hers as he wraps his arms around her, pulling her close, only stopping when his head is resting on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she whispers, running her fingers through his hair, scraping her nails against his scalp. "I'm gonna be fine." He doesn't respond right away, and that makes her pause. He's so shaky, so emotional… "I am going to be fine, right?" she asks, and neither of them miss the dulled edge of hysteria starting to fill her voice.

"Yeah," Oliver says. He sits up, almost like he suddenly remembered just where they are and just what condition she's in. He moves his hands up and down her arms, blinking back tears. "Yeah. Caitlin says everything looks good. It's been looking good. We still don't know exactly what Malcolm used on you. At first, we thought it was the Tibetan pit viper venom that the League uses…" Oh *God*, she hadn't even thought about that. "But it wasn't. He hit Digg with the same thing as you, but it didn't have the same effect on him. He was only out for an hour or so. Which is why… which is why we weren't sure what happened with you. Caitlin thinks maybe you got a much larger dose, and it just affected you differently." His hand floats up, brushing over the spot on her forehead that'd connected with the dresser. "Probably because of how badly you hit your head." He sighs. "But you're okay. You're awake. Oh God, I'm so, *so* glad you're okay."

She can only nod, soaking his words in.

A week is a long time, too long, and she completely understands how terrifying all of this has been for him. But the way he's looking at her… As the minutes pass, he slowly relaxes, like he's getting acclimated to the idea of her really being there. The intense mixture of relief and stark fear on his face has her pushing her hand up into his hair. The urge to comfort him, to tell him she's *real* is too much to ignore. Felicity strokes the back of his head, her other hand cradling his cheek as she pulls him closer, pressing her forehead to his again.

His eyes instantly slip shut, and he leans into her hand, kissing her palm softly.

"Oliver," she whispers, "I'm not going anywhere. Ever."

"I know. I know, and I'm so…" He pauses. "But that's not…" Oliver sighs, his breath skating across her wrist. "You don't understand."

"Okay," Felicity says, pulling back to look at him again. "So explain it to me."

"Felicity, if I… lost you…" He stops, the words almost too heavy for him to say. He opens his eyes and blows out a steadying breath through his lips, although it doesn't do any good. "I can't imagine anything worse. It would… I couldn't handle it." He stares at her. "But it wouldn't just be that. It would mean losing Ellie, too… Losing the baby."

She frowns. "I get being worried about Ellie and Nate," Felicity says. "Like a lot. When you were fighting Slade and she started disappearing, that… I will *never* forget that feeling, but, Oliver-"

"No," he interrupts, stressing that single syllable like she's missing something.

Which she obviously is, and the spike of aggravation from earlier is back. She doesn't like being out of the loop like this, and while she gets that it's been a week, she just needs him to *tell* her what's going on. Why won't he just *tell her*?

"Then what…?" she starts, the words dark with annoyance.

Oliver sits up completely, effectively interrupting her as he meets her gaze. "The baby, Felicity."

"The…?"

And then his hand settles low on her belly with an emphasis that absolutely steals her breath away.

No.

A blanket of shock covers her, spiraling out from the spot he's touching. No, he can't… *No*. There's no way. There's *literally* no way, because she *literally* does everything someone is supposed to do, which means he cannot possibly mean what she thinks he means… She hit

her head, she's losing it, she's dreaming, this isn't *real*.

But the look on his face, the way he's staring at her…

The shift is obvious, as if the last several minutes hadn't just happened, and it takes everything in her not to freak out right then and there.

"Wh… what?" she asks breathlessly.

"You're pregnant."

Her heart possibly skips a couple dozen beats before it goes into triple time. *Pregnant*. A baby. She's… pregnant. *Pregnant*. The shock floods her system as her jaw drops, her limbs growing numb, her fingers and toes tingling. She's startlingly aware of his palm over her lower stomach, of the warmth seeping into her, of the way his fingers start stroking her softly.

Pregnant.

What?

Oliver watches her soak in his words. There's a kind of hopeful softness that washes over his face, and it's like magic because in the blink of an eye, all the misery and pain that'd been there simply evaporates. He's suddenly lighter, now that he's told her, now that she knows. Now that she knows she's pregnant. Now that she knows it wasn't just her life on the line, it wasn't even just Ellie… it was so much more.

Felicity can't *breathe*.

There's some hesitation on his face, some worry - probably because he just told her she's *pregnant*, and *oh wow*, is this real?

"I'm…" she starts but her voice trails off as she tries to make sense of everything. "I'm not…"

How did she not know? That seems like something she should know, doesn't it? That's kind of a *huge thing* to not know about, right?

Like he's reading her mind, Oliver pulls her hand from his cheek and over his lips. He kisses her fingers in a way that's meant to soothe her… and it works. She takes a deep breath, and despite the intense wash of confusion and slight panic setting up shop in her mind, his

actions quiet the rush of her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

"You are," he says. "You're pregnant."

"But…" Felicity shakes her head. "How is that possible?"

Oliver laughs, a breathy sound that's still strained and uneven, but how *light* it is… that strikes her.

He wants this.

The realization hits her like a thousand pounds of bricks landing on her head, and it calms her, more than anything else would have. He'd been terrified, showing her the grief and pain of the last week, but now…

Now it's like looking at a totally different Oliver. *Her* Oliver. This is the man she'd spent the last several weeks with, the man she'd had a daughter with, the man who… the man who was giving her another child.

Her mind goes absolutely blank at that.

They're having a baby.

"Caitlin drew blood to try and figure out what you were dosed with," he tells her. "You're not very far along yet, obviously. She said she wasn't surprised we didn't know. But if you do the math…" He smiles, a soft, secret smile that's just for them. When it reaches his eyes, she can't help but return it. He's so *happy*, and that lightness in him, it's damn near contagious. She can't help it, she can't help but respond to it, to the sudden intense wave of joy coming off him. Oliver turns her hand over, kissing her palm before finishing, "We had a very memorable last first date."

Felicity chokes out a laugh, and it takes her a second to realize she's crying.

Maybe it's the way he says it, like he's been playing those words over and over in his head for the last week, just waiting for a chance to say them to her, but she suddenly knows beyond the shadow of any doubt that it's *true*.

Wow.

Oliver's lips are still pressed to her palm and his hand is still pressed

to her stomach. She revels in the way his mouth curves against her palm as he watches her process the news, as his smile grows at whatever he's seeing on her face.

It's a lot… it's actually kind of *too much*, but at the same time…

She's so weirdly *happy*.

Felicity covers his hand where he still rests against her stomach. Their fingers interlace, locking together.

"I'm pregnant," she says. The words taste strange on her tongue, but it forces the rest of the disbelief right out of her, replacing it with a nervous mix of hope and fear and excitement and… and too many emotions to name. "We're having a baby."

He nods, his grin uncontainable now. "We're having a baby."

"Oh… *wow*. Wow, this is…" A thought hits her, and it makes her jump. "Oh God, the baby! What if the drug Malcolm gave me hurts the baby?"

"No," Oliver answers immediately. He presses a firm kiss to her temple before continuing. "No, Caitlin has been watching you very, very closely, and she says everything looks normal. If you'd been further along it might have been a bigger danger to the baby, but so far everything looks good. We lucked out."

The relief that washes through her is staggering. And then slightly alarming. And then… oddly comforting. She's known about this tiny little creature for all of one minute, and already it's as much a part of her as Oliver and Ellie are. Which is just a *weird* feeling, a very, very *weird* feeling. She hadn't even known there was someone to be worried about until a moment ago and now her sense of protectiveness is utterly primal.

"Wow," she says, looking down at her stomach. Their hands completely obscure it, but knowing something's in there. "Wow."

"Yeah," Oliver replies. He leans forward, cupping her jaw to tilt her face to his. He kisses her softly… *reverently*. "Wow."

A little sob slips out, but it's a happy sob. She smiles against his lips, kissing him back before he pulls back.

Oliver moves, rearranging the various tubes and wires still connected

to her - she's barely noticed them, which is a *feat* - before he leans back against the headboard, urging her back with him. Felicity settles into his chest, unable to keep her eyes off their joined hands atop her stomach.

A baby.

That notion buzzes in her head like white noise. It's both abstract and real all at once. Her stomach is still flat - which logically *duh* - but she's suddenly bombarded with images of it being more rounded, of Oliver's hand on there, of him speaking to it… of Ellie speaking to it…

She wants it with a longing that fills her heart with warmth just as much as it freaks her right the hell out. A hundred questions fill her head, just as she hears a voice telling her everything will be fine.

Will it?

Felicity's eyes fly to Ellie. They already have a daughter, a child together… but that's *different*. Isn't it? They didn't raise her, not from the beginning. They missed so much, and while she finds herself thinking about all those times, about everything they didn't get the chance to enjoy because she's not from their time, it's still something she never really fully realized until this moment.

They're having a *baby*.

"Is this too early?" she blurts.

"For it to be Ellie?" Oliver asks, completely misreading her, because her eyes remain fixed on their daughter. He nods, his beard scraping against her temple. "Yes. But I don't think that'll change what happens with her."

God, she hadn't even thought of *that*. Not yet, at least.

"No… I mean…" Felicity swallows hard before sitting up again, turning to look at him. "For us. Is this too early for *us*."

Something flutters over his face, something too quick for her to catch. She forges on.

"We haven't been together that long, Oliver, and, I mean… I want this." She squeezes his fingers over her stomach again for emphasis. "I want this a lot, which is kind of terrifying because… Obviously I've been okay with it since we're supposed to have Ellie eventually, but

that's *eventually*. But… I love you, so this… I want this. But this…" She waves at him, at herself, the baby, Ellie, *everything*. "Is so fast. Too fast? Are we really ready for a baby?"

She's not sure exactly what she expected him to do. Freak out right along with her, or try to calm her down, or just sit there silently, letting her lose it because he's secretly unsure himself… But he does none of those things.

He's *calm*, almost serene, and it surprisingly settles something inside her.

It occurs to her that it's probably for the best that he found out first. He's had nearly a week to digest this information, and if she's being honest with herself, if they'd found out together, things likely wouldn't be this…

Peaceful.

That's what he is right now: *peaceful*.

But her words still strike something inside him, and a thin sheet of doubt skates over his face.

"Well…" Oliver sits up straighter. "We've sort of been doing things a bit out of order." She snorts at that, and he concedes. "Alright, more than a bit. But… just because it's fast doesn't mean it's wrong. We were parents before we were a couple, Felicity. And from the moment I realized that this was *real*, that this was a future we could have together… I've never once wished for anything else. So, no, I don't think it's too early. Maybe it isn't timing either one of us would have picked, but we also wouldn't have chosen for our toddler from the future to show up either, and I am grateful every single day that she's here."

"Me too," she whispers without a second thought. Because it's *true*.

Still, Felicity searches his face, looking for any trace he's holding something back, any hesitation. She finds nothing though. He's being real; he's being honest. He wants this, and he has wanted this, as much as she has. And now they have it. It bolsters her, to the point where she actually finds herself nodding and smiling.

His eyebrows tick up as he waits for more from her.

Biting her lip, Felicity looks down at their hands and she finally lets a

sense of excitement flow through her. Her child with Oliver is growing inside of her *right now*. They made a baby together. The very idea of that has a giddy little laugh bubbling out of her.

"We're having a *baby*," she says in amazement.

Oliver lets out a breathy chuckle before he nods, pulling her back into him. He leans back against the headboard, pulling her back flush to his chest as he presses his face into her neck. "We're having a baby." He takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly before whispering, "So you're happy then?"

The question throws her, partly because she can't believe he's asking that, and partly because it's still *so much*…

Felicity cranes her neck to look up at him, and it hits her how vulnerable he really is right now. He needs to hear her say she wants this, too. Because he does. Desperately. She can read that in the lines of his face as clearly as if he'd said it aloud.

"You make me happy," she replies. "And I want this. I want everything with you."

The smile that spreads across his lips is so bright it's practically blinding. She's not sure she's ever seen him this happy, and she's not at all surprised when he dips his head down, pressing his lips to hers. The kiss is long and soft. He keeps his hands on her belly the entire time, cradling her close.

He kisses her like he can't believe how lucky he is, like he cherishes her.

It absolutely takes her breath away to be loved like this, to know she gets to *keep* being loved like this.

God, she hopes she gets to keep this, that this is forever.

When she pulls back, Oliver's staring at her like she's his whole world.

"I love you," she says, the words out before she can even think them.

"I love you."

Felicity sighs, a contented little exhale of breath, and closes her eyes for a moment, letting herself linger. This, this is much better than what she'd woken up to, which in a way is almost just right. This is

her life - the highest highs and the lowest lows. It had been her life, ever since she met Oliver, and she wouldn't change it for the world. Yes, she often finds herself in pits of despair that are nearly all-consuming, but she's also so *happy*. Because of him.

She lets herself savor it, this wonderfully consuming feeling of being right where she's supposed to be. This might be fast, but then again, everything between them has been fast. Why change things now?

Neither of them move for a long moment, until Felicity opens her eyes. She strokes her hand over his where it rests on her stomach.

"Do the others know?" she asks. "Does Ellie?"

"Yeah," Oliver confirms, looking a little contrite at that. "We'd hoped that ARGUS knew something about the drug Malcolm dosed you with or that maybe Sara had seen it in the League." He shakes his head, a strange brand of aggravation she's never seen covering it before disappearing just as quickly. "Every time I managed to get her out of here, she snuck back in." Despite his obvious annoyance, that fills her with warmth, the idea that Ellie didn't want to stay away from her. Like father, like daughter. Oliver sighs. "She overheard, and then *everyone* in the house knew."

"And my mom?" Felicity asks.

Oliver winces. "Ellie beat you to the punch with that one. I'm pretty sure Donna was the first person she told, actually. Well, if you don't count her running through the house screaming about being a big sister."

"Oh."

The disappointment that she doesn't get the privilege of telling her mother the news is a little surprising.

"I'm sorry." He kisses her forehead. "I know you probably wanted to tell her."

"No." Felicity shakes her head. "Well, yeah, but… I mean, I'm still getting used to it myself so I would have probably sat on it for a week or two. Or five. I'm actually glad Ellie told her."

"There's always next time," Oliver offers. That makes her chuckle, and she leans into him as he continues, "Your mom's over-the-moon. It's actually hard to tell which of the two of them is looking forward to

the baby more. But Ellie is very, very excited about being a big sister. Or a little sister, technically. We're all a little unclear on how exactly that works, time-wise."

"She doesn't have any older siblings, right?" Felicity asks. "Back in her time, I mean."

"No." He must see the alarm starting to color her face because he immediately follows up with, "But she doesn't have my mom either, remember? And Malcolm was still alive in her timeline. I think it's safe to say we've changed things."

"Yeah, that's true." Felicity nods. He's not wrong, that's for sure. They've changed things drastically, in so many ways. But *still*. "What about…"

A tremendous yawn comes out of nowhere, cutting off her words.

Oliver laughs, stroking her hair away from her face lovingly. His hands are steadier now than before, but there's still a nervous anxiety in the way he touches her. He hasn't stopped touching her, not once, not since she's woken. Really, since before then too if the few times she managed to open her eyes are any indication. He still needs a connection between them. A few minutes doesn't erase a week's worth of agony waiting for her to wake up.

Before she can return the gesture though, she yawns again.

"Come on," Oliver says. "Let's lay back down."

"How can I be so tired?" she asks. "I've done nothing but sleep for a week."

"You've been healing," he replies. "And growing a baby. You're allowed to be tired. I'm pretty sure you're supposed to be actually."

"But I missed so much," she protests, fighting a yawn and failing. She waves at her stomach. "Like, I know about this, but what about Slade?"

His entire demeanor changes. "Felicity…"

She talks right over him. "And Thea and Roy? And your mother's election? And Queen Consolidated? And Lyla's job? Did Amanda Waller fire her? And what even constitutes firing at ARGUS, that can't possibly be good…"

Felicity doesn't miss the way he flinches as she rattles off her questions, but they all come in such quick succession that she can't tell precisely which part has him wincing. Or which part has his face shuttering up again, a thin veil of sadness and anger shading his eyes.

That only makes her want to stay awake more, but another yawn undermines that.

She curses.

"Later," Oliver says. "Okay? You need more rest."

"But if I…"

"Felicity," he interrupts, squeezing her shoulder. "Please. Just… Later. Okay?"

She doesn't quite believe him, but she chalks that assumption up to her just wanting to stay awake right this moment. No, she wants to press the issue now, especially because she's suddenly getting the feeling that he *wants* to put this off, that he wants to avoid talking about it… but she's also so *worn*. And as ridiculous as it is, she can't fight it.

"Fine," Felicity relents. His relief is obvious and it makes her want to push even more. But her body tells her that is just not going to happen. "*Fine*. But when I wake up…"

"When you wake up," he agrees. The same tone is there, and again, she doesn't *quite* believe him. When she narrows her eyes, he says, "I promise. Okay?"

She huffs. "Okay. So…" Felicity scoots down the mattress some until she reaches Ellie. She immediately curls herself around the toddler, who makes a happy little snuffling noise in her sleep. Felicity wastes no time in grabbing Oliver's arm and tugging him down to wrap around her as well. She yawns again, and it garbles her words as she adds, "So this is just gonna be a quick nap, okay?"

Oliver chuckles under his breath. "Just a quick one."

"Yes," she agrees, her words growing heavy. "A quick twenty minutes. That's all."

Felicity sighs in contentment as Oliver rearranges the various tubes and wires before he lays behind her. He pushes his arm underneath

her head, sliding it around so he's holding both his girls. He presses his face into Felicity's hair, kissing the back of her neck before resting his other hand protectively over her stomach.

She hums, sleep coming on quicker than she'd thought possible. She's home, and despite the questions lingering in the air - and Oliver's blatant avoidance - she's not sure she's ever felt quite so at ease, so wonderfully content. It's definitely that she's so tired, definitely that she has her family in her arms, definitely that they're all *safe*, definitely that she's growing a new life inside her… As all of that tumbles through her mind, she knows that the rest can come later.

Because she's *home*, they're *safe*, and those are the important things.

They fall asleep together, and they don't wake again for several hours.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

> There's a deleted scene from this chapter that can be found **here** for those who care to read just a bit more of this chapter. (We both post about FICoN all through the week, so check us out on Twitter: Janis | Bre and Tumblr: Janis/so-caffeinated | Bre/dust2dust34.)

The next time Felicity wakes, the light of day has chased away the darkness, leaving a changed world. She vaguely remembers flitting in and out of sleep several times after a brutal nightmare wracked Oliver's body, twisting his mind in a horrible vision of what might have been. Some mindless urge had kept her from sleeping too deeply after that, pulling her drowsily back toward wakefulness with the need to make sure everything was okay.

But this time, she truly wakes, rousing entirely from her too-long slumber. The night before seems like a dream, a vague, faraway dream.

Sunshine streams through the window, flooding the room in a brilliant yellowed light so bright it stings her eyes even through still-closed lids. She feels more like herself this time, less worn but no less achy. When she moves though, her muscles still scream from severe lack of use.

It doesn't take her long to realize something - rather, some*one* - is missing.

Felicity's eyes fly open. She squints against the light, looking around. Ellie's still curled up against her, but Oliver's not in the room. A surge of panic hits her and she nearly chokes on her next breath, ready to launch herself out of the bed - the last week be damned, random medical equipment attached to her be damned - when she hears the rumble of voices… somewhere.

One of them is Oliver's.

He's okay.

With a heavy exhale, she collapses back on the bed.

She isn't sure she's ever going to forget the sight of him lost in a nightmare like last night. Upon waking, he'd been so utterly terrified that what he was seeing when he looked at her wasn't real. And, even without talking about it, she'd known instantly it was about her. That she'd been dead or dying and he'd been unable to stop it. He'd looked at her like she was an apparition, a figment of his hopes and dreams manifested in front of him, and all she'd wanted to do was hold him. That feeling's back now. She wants to find him again, to feel him in her arms, to know that he was there just as much as he'd needed that reassurance from her. It nearly has her getting up right then and there.

But she doesn't, because he's okay. He's not shuddering in violent, uncontrollable tremors and sobbing her name as he twists against the sheets.

And because she's still *so tired.*

The urge to give back into sleep almost takes over again, but instead, her conversation with Oliver from the day before rushes back to her.

Right.

She's *pregnant.*

"Oh," Felicity breathes, the reality of that notion slamming into her like a ton of bricks as she lets her hands fall back to the bed. "Wow."

Her hands naturally migrate to her stomach and she just lets them rest there. It's still the same, nothing there's changed, at least not on the surface. But inside… They're having a baby. *Now*.

A little niggle of panic quickly dissolves into excitement before morphing into a fear that finally settles on hopefulness.

It almost doesn't feel real. Did she dream the entire thing? Is the idea of her being pregnant just the result of some drug-induced fever dream? Is it her mind's way of trying to cover up the emotional and mental trauma that keeps falling into their laps? What if she's really losing it this time?

The sound of the voices down the hall rising slightly interrupts her thoughts.

She slowly sits up, careful not to wake Ellie as she strains to hear them. When she realizes she's squinting at the door - like *that's* gonna help her hear better - she turns to find her glasses waiting for her on the nightstand.

"... can't let him get to you, Oliver." It's Diggle. "He's hurting and he's lashing out. You're just the easy target. And it's a good thing you're taking it. He needs that right now. But don't be foolish enough to take it to heart."

Digg's voice is certain, commanding. Felicity has no idea who they're talking about or what's happening - and that only reminds her that Oliver has given her absolutely no answer about what else went on outside of her injury and Ellie's well-being. But if Diggle's taken it upon himself to try and keep Oliver from beating himself up in her absence, she can't help but be grateful. Especially after last night.

"Until we've got something to move on, there's no point in putting yourself out there," Digg continues. "You're exactly where you need to be right now, with your hurt pregnant girlfriend and your scared toddler. Felicity and Ellie and the baby need you here. You got me?"

The baby.

Okay, so she didn't dream that part. She really is pregnant.

A bolt of nerves shoots through her. It's *real.* Without Oliver's calming, steady presence or the confident look in his eyes telling her everything is going to be okay, she finds it's a little bit easier to slip into the apprehension it causes. She's happy, she is… but it's easier to be okay with it when Oliver's there.

"Yeah. I know that," Oliver replies to Digg. The sound of his voice steadies Felicity and she takes a shaky breath, sitting up more. His frustration is also distracting. He's torn over something - something else - and it's painfully obvious. "And the last thing I want to do is leave her side, especially now. God, you have no idea how much I want to be in there with her. But the more this goes on... Digg, we have to find her. It's been a *week.* She's alone out there and confused and scared and angry... I can't blame him in the least for holding it against me that this happened when we haven't even tracked her down yet."

With a frown, Felicity whispers, "What?" to the room. Silence is her answer.

She's missing something, something big. What she does remember doesn't exactly fit with what she's hearing. The pieces aren't quite falling into place, they aren't making a picture she can understand, and she kind of hates being out of the loop, as impossible as it's obviously been to keep her involved.

Felicity finds herself leaning toward the door more, as if it might make the voices louder, when she hears something else. But it's not Oliver or Digg she hears. No, it's a someone much, much closer.

"Momma?" Ellie's hopeful little voice cuts through the noise of the conversation in the hall and Felicity turns her head to find her daughter's woken up and staring at her like she's afraid to believe her own eyes. The second Ellie sees her up and moving, pure joy covers her face and she launches herself at her mother with a loud, "*Momma!*"

Ellie scrambles up onto her lap and flings her arms around her neck.

Felicity instantly wraps herself around the toddler, holding onto her tightly as an entirely different brand of joy bursts to life inside her. Tears burn her eyes again - *happy* tears. The last time she'd seen her daughter up and awake, she'd been screaming as a madman dove towards her, trying to take her away.

But it didn't work. He didn't win. She's here, and he's gone. For good.

"Oh, Ellie…" Felicity whispers. "My little Ellie-bug."

When Ellie buries her face in the crook of Felicity's neck, sobbing out a little cry of relief into her skin, Felicity's own tears blur her vision. Ellie breathes in so deeply that Felicity's hair moves enough to tickle her neck and she lets out a laugh, rejoicing in the sensation.

The familiar scent of Ellie's strawberry shampoo wafts from her messy curls and suddenly Felicity isn't sure which of them needed to hold the other one more. The thought that Felicity might never have gotten to do this again… As if the toddler can feel the memory surfacing, as if she feels Felicity's heart pounding fiercely in response, Ellie hugs her mother even tighter, practically clinging to her.

It's incredibly grounding.

"Hey, I'm okay," Felicity says, rubbing the little girl's back. She runs her fingers up and over the back of Ellie's head, her fingers catching in tangled curls. And then it's her turn to press her face into Ellie's neck, to breathe her in. "We're okay. I'm right here."

"No more sleeping," Ellie commands into her neck, sniffling as she speaks, a tell-tale quiver in her voice. "I need you awake with me, Momma. Daddy was so sad. He cried a lot, even when I gave him hugs. I don't like when he has Sad Eyes, Momma. It makes me scared."

"I'm so sorry, baby," she murmurs. Guilt rears its ugly head inside her, even though she knows it's not her fault. She still feels like she should have been there, and it's one more reason why she's so glad that Malcolm Merlyn is dead. "I don't want you to be scared or Daddy to be sad. I'm getting better now, okay?"

"Okay," Ellie agrees, but she doesn't loosen her grip at all, which Felicity is perfectly fine with. The need to hold her daughter is all-encompassing and she's grateful that the feeling is mutual, in spite of how deeply affected Ellie clearly is.

After a few minutes, Ellie pulls back, but only enough to reach up to touch her mother's face, cradling her mother's cheeks with her little hands. It's the perfect mirror image of how Oliver had held her the day before, and it sucks the breath right out of Felicity's lungs. Ellie stares up at her with Oliver's red-rimmed eyes and *God*, every time she thinks she couldn't love the little girl more, she's proven wrong.

It makes her wonder what the next one will be like.

That thought has her heart thumping wildly.

With Ellie in her arms like this, staring at her with such pure love, the earlier panic evaporates, leaving nothing but a quickly growing joy in her chest.

They made another one of these, and that's *amazing*.

"Oh!" Ellie suddenly exclaims, as if she's reading her mother's thoughts. She slides off of Felicity's lap. "Did I squish the baby?" She stares at Felicity's stomach with wide, worried eyes, her brows deepening with concern. She chews on her lip anxiously as she softly pats Felicity's midsection, like she's made of glass before pulling her hands back. "Nate's not this small."

"No, sweetie, you didn't squish the baby," Felicity assures her, grabbing Ellie's hand and squeezing in reassurance.

"Are you sure?" Ellie asks. "She's very little." Felicity's heart stutters at that. *She*. Before Felicity can follow that up, the toddler tilts her head in contemplation, noting, "You aren't even round yet."

It takes everything Felicity has not to laugh outright at that. Bless Ellie and her ability to make it seem like her concerns are the most important thing in the entire world, because really, they are. It helps that they make her own concerns seem very far away. Ellie's worry is simple and perfect, and it's something Felicity should really start adapting because she likes this warm feeling filling her. It's much better than the pit of panic she'd been slipping into when she'd been on her own.

"I'm sure," Felicity tells her. She takes Ellie's hand and places it on the flat plane of her stomach. "Caitlin's been taking care of me, right?" It takes her a second, but Ellie eventually nods. "She's a good doctor. And she didn't tell you that you couldn't sit on my lap, right?"

"Yeah," Ellie agrees, but she's still hesitant. Her eyes dart back down to her fingers where they rest on her mother's stomach.

Felicity smiles, pressing her hand over Ellie's on her stomach more firmly before using the other to brush Ellie's hair back. "She would have warned you if there was anything you could do that was a danger to the baby. I promise."

"I guess she's pretty strong," Ellie decides aloud. "Even the bad man didn't hurt her and he was trying."

And just like that, the serenity of the moment cracks. Felicity's smile falters, remembering Ellie had been right there, watching everything when Malcolm had tried to get to her, but then she catches herself.

"She must get it from your daddy," Felicity says, tweaking Ellie's nose playfully. "Just like you, Ellie-bug." Delight colors Ellie's face, obviously delighting in the comparison to her future sibling and their father. "Daddy was stronger than the bad man, too, and now the bad man's gone forever, right?"

If Felicity could have one wish, it would be that Ellie never had to think about the bad man again. She's already got more than enough on her plate for therapy well into adulthood, she doesn't need more. Ellie may be one of the strongest people she's ever met, but she's still a kid dealing with more than any adult should ever have to fathom.

Ellie nods. "You're strong, too, Momma," she recites sagely, like it's something she's heard a million times. "You do the right thing even when it isn't easy. You gotta be strong for that. That's what Uncle Diggle says." Her face is extra serious as she adds, "It's not always about muscles."

"He says that, huh?" Felicity asks, a wave of affection for her friend washing over her. "Well then it must be true."

"Yeah, he's never wrong," Ellie advises. She glances behind her before turning back to Felicity. She raises her hands to cup her mouth, lowering her voice conspiratorially like she's letting her mother in on a big secret. "It's his superpower."

Felicity laughs at the earnestness on her face. "Does Uncle Digg wear a cape?"

"No," Ellie replies. She sits up with a frown. "It's true, Momma!" she insists, her voice rising. "Like Cisco's superpower is his spidey-sense when he touches things!"

Felicity just bites her lips together, pinching them between her teeth to keep in a laugh, managing to give her a nod. Ellie can still sense her disbelief though and she huffs, a look of pure irritation slipping across her face. But then it dissolves just as quickly. There's far too much that's happened to her lately for her to linger on something like this when her mother is finally awake and focused on her.

With an exaggerated sigh, Ellie leans into her mother again, but this time she slips down to pillow her head on Felicity's thigh. Her soft hair falls around her as she strokes a bare strip of skin between Felicity's shirt and sleep shorts.

"So…" Felicity ventures, watching Ellie nearly *pet* her belly. It's a breathtaking sight, something she'd barely even dared to contemplate when Ellie had asked if she could pretend to talk to her unborn brother. Now it's more real, because there's an actual *something* in there. It's no longer pretend. Although technically speaking, it hadn't been pretend then either. Still, the knowledge makes it all the more real. It's a heady thing to think about, but not it's not nearly as overwhelming as it had been. Not with Ellie here. "You think it's a girl?"

"It is," Ellie replies without a trace of doubt.

Something in her tone - the way she's so *sure* - makes Felicity pause. She keeps her voice light, struggling to find a way to ask the question without confusing either of them. "You don't have any older siblings, right?"

"Nope," Ellie agrees, popping the 'p'. "But we do have a bad man and we don't have a Gramma Moira." She snuggles in against Felicity's leg,

curling around her thigh. "I like the way it is here better."

Oh, but that makes Felicity's chest *ache*.

But Ellie's not done. She's quiet as she whispers, "Except…"

Her voice trails off, her face crumpling under the weight of a sorrow that should never live on her daughter's face. She turns her face into Felicity's leg, her hand clenching into a small, white-knuckled fist against the bare skin of Felicity's stomach.

"Except what?" Felicity prods, tucking Ellie's hair behind her ear. When she doesn't respond, Felicity tugs on a curl to get her attention. "Ellie?"

"Nothing," Ellie says in an uncharacteristically soft tone. She shakes her head and turns back to staring at her fingers where they've unfurled to stroke Felicity's stomach protectively. "I don't wanna talk about it."

Her first instinct is to push for more, because Felicity has absolutely no idea how to respond to that and she hates a mystery. It's an answer she's never gotten from Ellie before. Her daughter talks about everything and anything. She doesn't clam up. But is it a good idea to push her? Ellie's been through so much - *too* much - and not wanting to talk about something seems more than understandable. But still, it's so unlike her that the urge to prod until she caves sweeps over Felicity. Seeing the little girl so withdrawn is hard, and Felicity wants to figure out what's bothering her so she can make it better. It's nearly enough to make her insist on an answer.

Nearly.

"Okay," Felicity agrees. Ellie's eyes instantly dart up to meet her gaze and the sheer amount of relief on her face is solid proof to Felicity that she made the right call. "Okay, let's talk about the baby instead."

Ellie nods with a happy little sigh, snuggling in against Felicity again. "Okay."

"Got any tips for me?" Felicity asks.

That has Ellie's eyes going wide with surprise as she looks up at Felicity again. "Me?"

"Yeah *you*," Felicity tells her, poking the toddler's side, making her

giggle. "You've got more experience with this than I do, remember? What do I need to know?"

A serious edge takes over Ellie's face. She narrows her eyes, gnawing on her lip, thinking very hard about her mother's request. After a moment, she finally replies, "It's very, *very* important to have the right ice cream."

Felicity pinches her lips to keep her smile at bay, before she pushes the urge away. She nods, taking it just as seriously. "And what kind of ice cream is that?"

"I dunno, ask the baby!" Ellie replies. "I can't help you with *everything*, Momma."

With a chuckle, Felicity says, "Silly me," before reaching down and grabbing her, tugging the little girl back up into her arms. Ellie comes easily, more than content to be cuddled by her mother, especially after this week. She sighs, tucking her head against Felicity's collarbone, slipping her arms around her mother's midsection in a tight hug.

"I love you, Momma," Ellie murmurs. She pushes her face into Felicity's chest, taking a deep breath. As she exhales, it's like the strain of the last week leaves her little body and she just melts into Felicity's arms.

Felicity lets her eyes fall shut as she kisses the crown of her daughter's head. "I love you, too." She angles her head to press her lips to Ellie's forehead. "I always will. You are always going to be my baby, my first, no matter what happens. No big brother or big sister will ever change that. You know that, right? Having another baby doesn't change at all how I feel about you."

"I know, Momma," Ellie says, like it's obvious, like this is something she's been told shades of before. "And it's not a brother. It's a sister."

"How are you so sure?" Felicity asks, rocking her daughter slightly in her arms as they cuddle.

"Because you need a little girl," Ellie replies simply. "And because I heard Gramma Moira say I won't be here forever."

The words sucker punch her.

Felicity goes stock-still, her throat closing, her heart crashing to the

ground as a shock of terror slices through the core of her being.

No.

Ellie's not leaving. She can't. Felicity doesn't care what it means for the future anymore, she really doesn't, because it means she gets to keep her daughter. So, *sorry, future-self, that you lost your kid,* but she belongs here, damn it. It's selfish - *God*, it is so selfish - but Felicity can't bring herself to *care*. She loves this little girl with every ounce of her being. She would kill for her. She would die for her. And the idea of her disappearing one day feels as survivable as losing her lungs. She knows without a doubt that Ellie would take her heart with her if she left.

"Is that true, Momma?" Ellie asks, looking up at her. The amount of nervous innocence in her voice *hurts*. "Do I have to leave?"

How is she supposed to answer that? Felicity can barely begin to formulate thoughts, much less actual words. It's too much. She's not ready. She doesn't think she'll ever be ready.

"I will…" Her voice falters and she squeezes her eyes shut. And then she clears her throat before she trying again. "I will *always* be with you, Ellie," she vows. It's both true and the closest thing to an answer she can offer. Because anything else… *no*, it's too much. "Wherever you are - *whenever* you are - I promise you that. I will never leave you. Not ever."

The answer satisfies Ellie, who smiles and wiggles her little body closer to her mother, hugging her tightly. But Felicity is far from at ease. She will never leave Ellie, there's no doubt of that. But she can do nothing other than pray that Ellie never leaves her. A sob clogs her throat and she clamps her lips together to keep it at bay. Future-self be damned, Felicity can't bring herself to care about that woman. She *can't*. Not when the alternative means being willing to give Ellie up. Which she isn't. She's not even capable of that, and she knows it.

Felicity hugs her daughter harder, as if tightening her grip will hold her in place forever. Logic is a brutal voice in her head, telling her that sheer willpower alone isn't enough to keep Ellie at her side, but she ignores it. Because maybe it can, and if that's the case, Felicity has that kind of willpower in *spades*.

There's a long moment of quiet. Ellie's happy sighs are the only thing that punctuate the silence of the room. It's perfect, in a way. Peaceful. The only thing that could make it better is Oliver cocooning them

both in his arms.

It's only then that Felicity realizes his voice has faded away in the hall, along with Digg's.

There's obviously *something* that needs their focus right now, even if she doesn't know what it is yet. And despite her insistent curiosity when she'd woken up, she so doesn't care right now. Instead she savors this moment for what it is - a slice of heaven, with one daughter secure in her arms and another safe in her womb.

"I like hugging you when you can hug back," Ellie whispers, breaking the silence.

"Me too," Felicity sighs. "Me too."

She doesn't want to move, not for anything, but that decision is taken away from her.

The sound of the bedroom door creaking breaks through the quiet of the room. The hinge lets out a high-pitched squeal that Felicity is pretty sure is supposed to be nothing more than a whisper as a familiar head of blonde hair peeks in.

But her mother has never been quiet in her life.

"Oh," Donna gasps when she sees her. "*Oh*, you're awake." She scurries across the lushly carpeted floor to the bedside as fast as her three-inch heels allow. "Oh, my baby…" She drops down on the edge of the mattress, causing her and Ellie to bounce as she says, "I was so worried!"

"I'm okay, Mom," Felicity manages just before Donna wraps her arms around her daughter, damned near squishing Ellie in the process. Felicity lets out a soft, "Oomph," as the older woman holds both of them with everything she has.

"Gramma!" Ellie protests, wriggling between them with a happy giggle. "We can't breathe!"

Felicity chuckles because she's not wrong. She's not sure she's ever been squeezed so tightly by her mother in her life. When Donna backs off, she seems a little abashed, her cheeks flushing as she flips her long blonde hair over her shoulder. But she doesn't let Felicity go.

"It's a mother's prerogative," Donna insists. She smiles at Ellie, tugging

on a piece of her hair playfully, just like Felicity had a moment ago. "Besides, you're hugging your momma just as tightly, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I got little arms," Ellie points out, as if that makes all the difference as she nestles into her mother's lap for the long haul.

"And they are great arms, Ellie-bug," Felicity says, kissing the little girl's curls again. "My Ellie-bug with her Ellie arms."

Ellie positively radiates happiness. It's blinding, intoxicating, and it breaks Felicity's heart a little to realize that the last week had most definitely not been like this for her. She'd had more fear than joy in her life these days, more terror than smiles, and it's startling once again to realize how incredibly resilient her little girl really is. She's not sure she can bounce back from this as quickly as Ellie has. The image of Malcolm diving for her daughter will be seared into her mind's eye for years, she's certain.

Felicity is distracted enough by Ellie's near-hypnotic level of happiness that it takes her a moment to register her mother's watery eyes and sniffles as she tries to contain her emotions.

She's not succeeding.

Their eyes meet over Ellie's head. Felicity offers her a small smile, as if to say, '*See, I really am fine,'* It's obvious that's not nearly enough when all Donna can muster is trembling lips and a quick nod. There's a million and one things filling her mother's eyes, questions and unspoken words, but she won't voice them in front of Ellie.

"Are the tachyon detectors working?" Felicity asks.

Donna's brows furrow at the sudden change in topic. "What?"

"It makes *big* noises," Ellie confirms with a nod. "The very biggest. It's even louder than the fire alarm at preschool. I have to cover my ears."

Several thoughts strike Felicity at once. First, somehow they're secure enough with their daughter's safety in the future that they actually send her to preschool. *That* throws her for a loop. The next is the realization that Zoom has been just as active in trying to breach through their time as he was before. That has an icy shiver falling down her spine. But there's also a warring sense of relief that the detector works along with terror that she'd slept right through a noise like that, injured so badly that she'd have slumbered on while Zoom stole away her child.

But she doesn't really take the time to process any of those thoughts.

"Can you go find Daddy?" Felicity asks Ellie. "And tell him I'm awake?" The toddler's face instantly sours. She doesn't like that idea at all. She shakes her head, pouting adorably, her fists tightening against the back of Felicity's shirt. "Please, baby?" Felicity rubs her back. "Daddy will want to know I'm awake. You'd make him very happy."

That makes Ellie pause, which is exactly what Felicity was aiming for. But she still looks torn. Wrinkles work their way into her smooth brow and her nose crinkles up, her lips pursing.

It takes Felicity a moment to connect the dots. Ellie *adores* her father, but it's not because of Oliver that she doesn't want to go. Ellie's hesitance comes from some other place entirely.

"I'm not tired," Felicity says. Ellie's relief is instantaneous - she relaxes, her face smoothing out, but the way she watches her mother tells Felicity she's still weighing the truth of her words. "And I'm not going to go back to sleep anytime soon, okay? Get Daddy and come back. I'll still be awake." Felicity ducks down, pressing her forehead to Ellie's. "I promise."

"You promise?" Ellie demands, her hands coming up to cup Felicity's cheeks.

"I *promise*," Felicity echoes again with a smile. "I'll be here."

After a moment, something settles on Ellie's face and she nods. "Okay." She kisses Felicity on the cheek before sliding off her lap. She pats Donna's hand with a serious, "Take care of Momma, Gramma," before turning. Donna doesn't let her get very far though. She grabs the little girl's hand and pulls her back, planting a wet kiss on the top of her head. Ellie giggles. "Gramma! I gotta go get Daddy!"

"I know, I know," Donna says, letting her go. "Go be your momma's helper, little one."

Ellie beams before darting towards the door.

"Oh, Ellie!" Felicity calls after her. Her daughter skids to a stop, spinning to face them, her eyes wide and eager. It's clear she will do anything - *anything* - to please her mother right now. That tugs on Felicity's heart strings. "Can you find Caitlin, too? Ask her to come in when she can?"

"Yep!" she says with a definitive nod. And then she's gone, speeding onto her mission at the speed of light. Well, it seems that way, anyhow. For such little legs, the girl sure can move.

"You didn't have to make her leave," Donna says, cutting right to the chase. The way she sniffles tells Felicity she definitely did, especially when her mother wipes at the corner of her eye. "I know she wants to spend time with you."

"Yeah, I did," Felicity replies. She gives her a small smile, patting her mother's hand the same way Ellie had. "You're not great at hiding tears, Mom, and I know you were doing your best to keep it in for Ellie's sake."

"Oh, baby." Donna gulps back a sob as she grips Felicity's hand. "You have no idea how stressful this last week has been. We've all been trying to keep it from Ellie. But it's been *hard*."

The tears on her mother's face and memories of Oliver the night before - both when she'd woken up and how he'd reacted when he'd realized his dream wasn't real, that she was really there - fill her head. Felicity has an idea, but seeing the stark fear on her mother's face has her wondering.

"How bad was it?" Felicity asks. The hesitance in her voice tells her she probably really doesn't want to know. Not after witnessing Oliver's nightmare, not after feeling the desperation in his every touch.

Donna blinks hard, sending a few mascara-laced tears streaming down her face. She bats them away, looking off to the side.

For once, Felicity suspects her mother isn't just being dramatic for the sake of drama.

This is real.

"No one could figure out what *that man* drugged you with," she says, practically spitting in anger at the very idea of Malcolm Merlyn. "That was bad enough, but when we found out you were pregnant… Oh, I don't know if I've ever been so scared. You were so *still* and no one knew how to make you better and you just wouldn't wake up. Your breathing was so weak and your pulse was barely there. Oliver didn't want to admit it was as bad as it was. When you didn't wake up and Caitlin said she needed to feed you by IV because of the baby… Oh, honey, he just crumbled."

Felicity's voice is small as she asks, "He did?"

"Of *course* he did," Donna says with an earnestness that makes Felicity's chest hurt. "We thought we might lose you more than once. I was terrified, too, but Oliver… With everything else going on, I'm just not sure how he kept it together as much as he did. I can't imagine he would have if it weren't for Ellie needing him. She's been our saving grace through all of this." She tightens her grasp on Felicity's hand for emphasis. "That little girl is so strong. Without her, Oliver might've…"

Her words fade though, but the implication is enough.

Felicity nods. It's all she can manage as she soaks in her mother's words. The thought of Oliver going through what she's barely begun to catch a glimpse of makes her lungs feel like they're filling with sand. Tears burn her eyes and she glances down to where her fingers run through the sheet, leaving it in a crumpled mess in her lap. She knows it was bad - the IV and catheter are enough evidence of that - but from the sounds of it, she's lucky there isn't a breathing tube, too.

The mental image of her lying there helpless with Oliver at her side, gripping her hand and willing her to wake up for a *week* is gut-wrenching.

"I knew that man loved you from the second I laid eyes on the two of you together," Donna says, pulling Felicity's attention back to her face. "But I had no idea how much until I sat in this room with him for a solid week and watched him fall apart as he stared at you like a sad, lost little boy."

Felicity can't keep her mother's gaze at that. The idea of Oliver that distraught, that worried about her… she can picture it. She's *seen* it. But the way her mother describes it, it's almost too much. She knows it's there, she's literally living it, but that other people see the same thing when they look at them? They haven't been together that long and she knows he loves her but sometimes it surprises her that this is real, that it's *this* strong.

A mere month ago she'd thought the only things between them were their shared mission, a solid friendship, and a hugely inappropriate one-sided crush.

"You're his whole world," Donna says, squeezing Felicity's hand. Felicity closes her eyes for a second at the veracity in her tone. "You know that, right? You are it for him. I've never seen anyone look at someone the way he looks at you."

"He's it for me, too," Felicity replies without skipping a beat, the words rolling off her tongue as naturally as loving Oliver feels.

She still can't meet her mother's eyes though. It's true. The way she feels, the *knowledge* that he is it for her, it's absolutely true. But while she knows her mom's words are true, the sudden affirmation of his feelings for her has her head spinning just a little bit. It's a lot, and she needs a second.

Felicity's free hand flits to her stomach unwittingly before falling away again.

So much is happening, and it's all coming on so *quickly*…

But there's no hiding anything from Donna Smoak. There never has been.

Donna tilts her head, a softer smile lighting her face. She brushes some of Felicity's unruly hair back behind her ear as she says, "You've always kept your heart at arm's length." Felicity ducks her head, pressing her lips together tightly. She's not wrong. "And you've had reason to. Between your father… Cooper…" Donna sighs, and Felicity finally looks back at her. "I know none of that was easy, honey, and that all of it left its mark, made it hard to trust that a man will love you enough to stay, to count on it being forever. And you hate making yourself vulnerable. You always have." Felicity flushes at that, making Donna smile, but she doesn't look away. "But you need to keep letting Oliver prove he's the exception. Because he *will*, every day, for as long as you let him."

The certainty in her mother's voice is something Felicity's didn't realize she needed to hear until just now. Because she's *right*. Trust and vulnerability never come easy for her. It was easy to join Oliver's crusade, to trust him with the fate of the city and being part of it, to trust in him as her friend and partner… but like *this* - loving him and him loving her - it's different. And she does trust him, she *does*, but that doesn't mean she hasn't had moments of doubt flit through her mind. Doubt that he'll stay, that they'll wind up together until they're old and gray, that she can count on him - on *anybody* - that much. Felicity had never let herself think that far ahead because it kept her safe. There wasn't room to be disappointed when you weren't expecting that much. But here, right now, she is. And God, she wants it. She's *expecting* this to last, because she needs it to, because she depends on it.

And that is *terrifying*.

But it's also exhilarating at the same time. Because she's not alone. He's right there with her.

Finding the one person you love with every ounce of your being, the one person you'll have a family with, the one you'll count on to be there through *anything*, that will be there until the end… That particular brand of Happily Ever After had always seemed exclusive to romantic comedies and Hallmark Channel movies that she'll never admit she spends entire Sundays watching.

Except maybe it's not.

Maybe it's real. Maybe she does get it. Isn't Ellie evidence of that? And the new baby, the one they made together *now*?

She's already made the leap. She loves Oliver, completely and totally. So, the next leap is…

Felicity smiles. "I'll keep letting him." This time she keeps her mother's gaze and the pride and love shining back at her fills Felicity with warmth. "I think… I think he's worth risking everything for. I think I want to risk everything for him. No." She shakes her head slightly. "No, I do. I do want to."

She doesn't even realize her hand has dropped back to settle protectively on her stomach until her mother smiles and peers down with a knowing look of quiet delight settling across her face. Her relationship with her mother has never been better than it has been in the last few weeks, but before that it'd been rocky. And yet, her mother still knows her.

"He said you didn't know about the baby?" Donna asks.

It's a question, but it's one she already knows the answer to. That leaves Felicity wondering precisely how much bonding her mother and Oliver did at her bedside over the last week. It's strange to think she was here, but still missed all of it anyway.

"No," Felicity confirms. Her thumb strokes at the skin of her stomach in a move that's almost like she's trying to soothe the baby. "No, I didn't have any idea."

"But you're happy about it?" her mother asks. "You want this?"

"I shouldn't, should I?" Felicity questions. The words are out before she can stop them and a wave of guilt hits her. "I only mean… It's so fast. Everything's been a whirlwind and we haven't been together that long. I know from Ellie that we're together in the future, but this… this right here is still… *so fast.*" She looks to Donna. "It's crazy to want this, right?"

"That's your head talking," Donna replies, touching Felicity's forehead with a gentle press of her finger. "You always do that. And most of the time it serves you well because you've got a good head on your shoulders. But this time…" She taps her nail right over Felicity's heart. "I think you should be listening to this."

Felicity smiles, nodding. "Yeah." She pauses, and does just that.

What does she *really* want?

"I want Oliver. Today, and every day. I want three beautiful children with him. And I don't want to wait for *someday* when it seems like it's a predetermined amount of acceptable time to have everything I want when I can have it all right now." She laughs, shaking her head in amazement, which has Donna laughing along with her. "I would marry him from this bed if he asked me."

"I know," Donna says, and the happiness and warmth on her face backs that up. Her eyes fill with tears for a completely different reason than they were earlier.

Felicity smiles at her. "That's what my heart's telling me." She pauses. The white noise in her head is still there. "But am I crazy, though?"

"No, baby," Donna says. "You're in love." Adoration and pride are etched in her every feature as she touches her daughter's face softly. "But I understand the confusion. When it's right, sometimes they look a bit alike."

Felicity laughs a little at that and Donna joins her. She leans towards, touching their foreheads together. Sharing this moment with her mother like this, it has so much more meaning to it than Felicity could have ever possibly understood before Ellie. Because now she *gets* it. She understands the fear her mother must have had for her, understands what it's like to want her daughter to grow up and fall madly in love with someone who loves her back, someone who makes her so happy and hopeful.

She gets it.

"I'm sorry I scared you," she tells her mother.

Donna huffs at that, pulling back. She shakes her head a little, her blue eyes watery. This time the emotion accents her bright smile. "It's not like you did it on purpose, Felicity. Still…" Donna smooths Felicity's hair back before cupping her face, looking her straight in the eye. "Just don't do it again, okay?" Donna's eyes dance all over her, and her voice is tremulous as she says, "I'm not sure I could take it." She makes a face. "I'm not sure Oliver could either."

As if on cue, Oliver's familiar frame fills the doorframe.

He's a little winded, like he'd run from wherever Ellie had found him. The instant his eyes find her, he visibly relaxes, his lips pulling up in a tiny smile. Judging by the way Donna's smiling at her, Felicity wonders if she does the same thing at the sight of him.

"Hey, you," Felicity says, her voice dropping in what just might be her Oliver voice.

Oliver's smile grows as he steps into the room. He manages a soft, "Hey," before he's interrupted.

The quick patter of small feet is the only warning any of them get before Ellie barrels into the room with a loud, "I got Daddy and Caitlin, Momma!" The toddler's plan is clear - she has every intention of launching herself back into Felicity's arms, collateral damage be damned.

Her father's faster than her though.

"Hey!" Oliver says, a little sharper than Felicity's heard before as he snatches Ellie up. She lets out a delighted shriek as Oliver lifts her into his arms. Oliver is much less enthused. His voice is low with warning as he says, "I said no running, Ellie."

"But you were running," she responds breathlessly. It's clear she's got him there, but Ellie doesn't give him a second to do anything about it before she's turning back to Felicity. "I want down, Daddy. Momma needs me."

Felicity definitely doesn't miss the flash of agitation that crosses Oliver's face - it's fast, there one second and gone the next, but it's still there. If there was nothing else to tell her how hard the last week had been, that look would have done it in one second flat. The stress is evident in both of them, and while they clearly sought solace in each

other waiting for Felicity to wake up, it hasn't been smooth sailing either.

"Ellie," Felicity starts but Oliver's already talking.

"Only if you ask nicely and promise you won't tackle your mother," Oliver says, leveling Ellie with a *look*. The toddler wilts, but only in stature - her face screws up with a stubbornness Felicity's pretty sure she gets from both her parents. "Ellie, she just woke up, remember?"

"I *know*," Ellie starts with a whine-like tone that Felicity's not used to from the toddler.

"That means you need to be careful," Oliver stresses. Like his words are a reminder to himself as well, he sighs. It's like watching him age five years. "Okay, Ellie-bug?"

Ellie sees it, too. She presses her lips together in what slowly becomes a little pout as she nods.

It's not a discord between them, necessarily, but it's obvious that they aren't exactly on the same page at the moment. They're still in the same book, of course - Felicity's pretty sure they will always be in the same book, based on what she's seen - but the last week's clearly pushed them a little out of sync.

The connection is still there, at least, just enough that they get through to each other.

"It was a little hard on all of us," Donna says, just loud enough for Felicity to hear, before she squeezes her daughter's hand.

With a near-silent, "Okay," Oliver puts Ellie down. She takes her time with her first few steps towards Felicity, for Oliver's benefit, but when she's out of his reach she picks up the pace, just enough to give her a boost as she sails past Donna and pushes herself up onto the bed. As Ellie curls up in her mother's lap - she can't deny her daughter, she just *can't* right now - Felicity catches Oliver's eyes. The smile he gives her is shuttered as he closes the distance between them.

Before she can ask him what's wrong, Caitlin appears.

"Oh," the young doctor says, immediately halting when she sees them all. "Ellie said that you needed me? I can come back…"

"Yes," Felicity interrupts, sitting up taller. "I was wondering if we

could…" She waves her hand, indicating the IV. "Now that I'm less horizontal, I'm thinking these aren't entirely necessary."

"Of course." As she steps into the room, she offers Oliver a warm smile. It's a reminder that Caitlin's another person who watched over her, who witnessed everything her family went through over the last week. "Not a problem, although I'd like to do a quick check-up first. We can do that later, if you'd like. I don't want to interrupt."

"No," Felicity says, shifting. "I'd really like stuff out, if you can. I'm suddenly extremely aware of how long it's been since I've taken a shower."

Oliver sidles up next to her, sliding his hand along the back of her shoulders. He digs his fingers in just enough to make her eyes flutter - oh, it feels good; she's oddly *sore* - before cupping the back of her neck and leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

"What stuff?" Ellie asks. "I can help with stuff."

"Uh…" Felicity blinks. "Just… stuff, baby. Stuff that only Caitlin can do."

"Ellie," Oliver says, smoothing his hand over his daughter's hair. "Why don't we let mommy do her stuff and we'll come back?"

"Oh no, I…" Felicity starts.

The same weird panic seizes both her and Ellie - Felicity doesn't want Oliver to go, and Ellie doesn't want to leave her.

Felicity grabs his hand, looking up at him. His fingers naturally curl around hers, holding her tight. It fills her with warmth and strength, a strength she doesn't have on her own just yet, and the thought of him leaving her - even to be with their daughter - is something she really, really doesn't want.

"Can you stay?" she asks.

Surprise flits across his face. Surprise at what? That she needs him there so much, or that she's asking him to stay and watch her get a physical? Regardless, it disappears quickly, replaced with a small smile tugging at his lips.

"Of course," he whispers, tightening his grip on her neck. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I can help, too, Momma," Ellie announces, pulling Felicity's attention back to her. "I helped Caitlin. Right, Caitlin?" She looks back at the doctor. "I checked the bitals."

"Vitals," Caitlin corrects. She smiles. "And she did. She was very helpful. But…"

Ellie's already repeating, "Vitals," with an exaggeration on the 'v' before Caitlin can finish. She nods and looks at Felicity with hopeful eyes. "See? I check your vitals. I need to stay, to make sure you're okay."

"I am okay," Felicity says. She smiles, kissing her daughter's cheek. "See?" She continues kissing Ellie's face until the little girl is giggling, saying in between each one, "I wouldn't be able to do this if I wasn't okay, right?"

"But Daddy gets to stay."

The words '*because I need him here*' don't really seem like something Ellie will understand.

"Hey, baby girl," Donna interrupts. She brushes Ellie's hair back behind her so she can see her face, the same way she did Felicity's. "How about you and I go get a little morning treat?"

It's painfully obvious that this is code only they can understand, because Ellie instantly gets it. Her face lights up, her mouth forming a little 'o'.

Well, them and Oliver.

"Donna," Oliver says in a low voice. The familiarity with which he uses her name is jarring and so not what Felicity is used to. Yet *another* reminder of just how much she'd missed. He doesn't sound annoyed though; he sounds relieved. Tired, but relieved. "That's the fourth day in a row."

"Isn't that what grandparents are for?" the older woman asks, giving Oliver a look before turning back to Ellie. "To spoil my grandchild completely rotten," she adds as she starts tickling the toddler. Ellie dissolves into a puddle of giggles again and it's all Felicity can do to keep her wriggling body in her arms. "And besides. It works."

Oliver concedes that with a grumbled response under his breath.

Donna holds her hands out for Ellie. "What do you say, baby girl? Should we go see what's downstairs? And then we'll come back up." She glances at Felicity and then Oliver. A look that has Felicity blushing crosses the older woman's face, especially when she adds, "In a little bit."

Her meaning is obvious.

"Mom," Felicity groans under her breath. "Come on."

"What, it's been a few days. I'm sure you could use some bonding time," her mother responds. She winks at Felicity before looking at Ellie. "Ready?"

Ellie looks ready to jump ship before changing her mind. She looks back at Felicity. "Will you be okay, Momma?"

"I'll be okay," Felicity replies. "I promise."

"I've got her, Ellie-bug," Oliver says, leaning over to kiss the top of her head, but Ellie pulls back at the last second, giving him a heavy look.

"Do you promise?" Ellie asks him. "You *promise* she won't go back to sleep again?"

It's not an empty question. Felicity remembers perfectly when Malcolm had reappeared in their lives, when Ellie had jumped in front of her, ready to defend her, the memory of the last time Malcolm had gotten too close so very present in her mind. Oliver had made a promise then, too. It didn't matter that it was his future self, a promise was a promise.

Oliver's voice is just as heavy, a solemnness underlining the words as he says, "I promise."

Ellie takes a deep breath and nods. Oliver leans down to kiss her head again, but Ellie shakes hers, swinging her arm around the back of his neck instead with a loud, "Ellie kiss!" Before either of them can so much as react, Ellie pulls both of them close, her lips already puckered. Oliver and Felicity both smile, their eyes meeting just before all their lips touch.

It's the first time they've have been together in a calm moment in what feels like years. It's almost ironic considering when Felicity thinks about the last thing she remembers, it feels like just yesterday when it was actually a week ago. They hadn't even had the chance to do this

before, when Oliver had gotten back from Queen Consolidated. Too much had been going on, they'd all been too distracted, especially with Thea.

That train of thought sticks in her mind as they all pull back. Her gaze finds Oliver's again. When he smiles, it doesn't reach his eyes.

"I'm gonna bring you back chocolate chips and Bavarian cream, Momma!" Ellie says, butchering the word '*Bavarian'*. "Gramma and me will!"

Felicity's eyebrows fly up at that. No wonder Oliver said something - Ellie's getting spoiled well beyond rotten at the hands of her grandmother.

"That sounds yummy, sweetie," Felicity says, kissing Ellie's cheek before handing her over to Donna. "I can't wait."

Donna hoists her up and stands, listening intently as Ellie starts talking about all the things they're going to bring Felicity when they come back up.

"In a little bit," Donna adds with a wink before they disappear out the door.

"She's subtle," Felicity remarks dryly.

Oliver chuckles.

"You know I'm going to say you probably shouldn't eat any of that, right?" Caitlin asks as she comes up, checking on the various bags hanging from the makeshift IV stand next to the bed. Oliver steps smoothly of the way, but not before squeezing the back of her neck. "Your stomach's been a little out of commission."

"Oh, trust me," Felicity replies. "My mouth may miss eating food - which is just weird, to miss the actual act of chewing. I hear them talking about food and I want something in my mouth. Like a lot of something. Which is not me talking about something *else*. I don't want that in my mouth. I mean, not right now. Okay, that is not…" She stops herself. After a second, she pats her stomach awkwardly. "What I'm trying to say is that the thought of eating chocolate chips and Bavarian cream pancakes and whatever crazy salad concoction she was talking about doesn't sit well in here."

Caitlin does a poor job of hiding her smile.

"And," the young woman adds, "I'm pretty sure morning sickness is going to start becoming an issue. So, we don't want to risk your stomach until you have a little more strength. That's not to say it couldn't start on it's own at any time, but it's best to be safe."

That has Felicity pausing - she hadn't even *thought* about morning sickness.

"Right," she replies absently.

Caitlin goes through the motions, starting with checking the tubing of the lines going in - and out - of her body before she starts a physical examination.

Before she can go into a round of questions, Oliver interrupts. "How about I get a bath started?"

He winks at Felicity, something that makes her stomach swoop - how he has the ability to do that to her even now is beyond her comprehension. Maybe it's the conversation she just had with her mother or the constant reminders of what he's gone through over the last week, or that she really, really not-so-secretly loves being at the receiving end of his affections. Whatever it is, she enjoys it, even if there's still a tinge of sadness on his face.

When her cheeks grow warm, the corner of his lips ticks up.

It doesn't escape her attention that it still doesn't reach his eyes.

"How about a shower instead," Felicity says. "Baths are for wine and relaxation and sex." Caitlin's hands falter slightly as Oliver's eyebrows fly up. It's a testament to how off her game Felicity still is that her filter and her usual ability to care about the whole foot-in-mouth thing is slowly slipping away. "Which is something we won't be doing. For now, I mean. Not that… that we haven't done it. Yet. I mean obviously, because baby..."

Oliver bites the tip of his tongue to keep his smile at bay, but it does nothing to allay the concern coloring his face as he asks, "Do you have enough strength for a shower?"

"If you're in there with me."

This time Oliver can't keep back a chuckle. Especially when a light blush colors Caitlin's cheeks, her lips pursing to keep quiet. With a nod and another wink, he whispers, "Subtle," before turning away and the

comparison to her mother is obvious. He does sort of have a point.

"Sorry," Felicity says to Caitlin. "I think I might be getting a little slaphappy. Usually I care a little bit more when I say stuff like that."

"It's more than understandable," Caitlin reassures her with a smile as she continues her examination. "A lot's happened in the last week. And even though you were technically unconscious for most of it, your body didn't slow down one bit."

She continues on with a series of questions and it's like any other physical Felicity's been to. Except for the additional questions about hydration and, you know, all the stuff within the last week she might have missed.

Like being pregnant.

"It's still really early," Caitlin says after putting on gloves. She starts removing the IV and other lines coming out of Felicity as she continues, "The only way I found out was because I include the test in every blood panel I run, just in case. It's good that I did, it dictated the treatment we gave you"

"Oliver…" Felicity's hand covers her stomach. Caitlin doesn't stop what she's doing, as if she'd expected it. "He said that whatever Malcolm gave me didn't hurt the baby?"

"As far as we know," Caitlin replies. Felicity's stomach drops, a balloon of terror filling her chest. Does that mean they still could? Caitlin instantly senses the shift in her and catches her gaze, resting her hand on Felicity's shoulder. "I'm just being cautious. There's been absolutely zero indication that it's affected the baby so far. It's very insulated in there. You took more of the damage than it did, which is good. You're getting better, which means it's getting better."

"It's a she." The words are out before she can stop them.

"Oh?"

"Trust me, I know how crazy that sounds," Felicity says. She looks down at her stomach, stroking it through the t-shirt. "I'm the first person in line to tell people there's no way you can tell the sex this early, but…" It does, it sounds ridiculous. But in spite of that, Ellie's words ring true - it's a girl. "It's a she. Ellie told me. Which makes it sound even crazier, but… I think she's right."

"You don't sound crazy," Caitlin says, finishing up putting her supplies away. She smiles. "You sound like a mom."

"A mom," Felicity repeats. "I'm gonna be a mom." That makes her pause. "I mean, I am a mom. Because Ellie, obviously, but this is… different, it's a different kind of mom, and wow, I thought the whole time travel thing gave me a headache before."

Caitlin chuckles. "I suggest you save yourself the headache for right now and concentrate on getting your strength back. Everything looks good so far, which is a miracle considering."

"Thank you." Felicity smiles at her. "For everything you've done. I'm sure it's a lot more than I know right now."

"Any time. Call me if you need anything. Or send Ellie, she's very effective at motivation." That makes Felicity chuckle. "For the time being I suggest starting simple with food - water, soup. Nothing solid for at least a day, just to make sure everything's working."

"Got it."

Caitlin gives her a nod and a small wave and then she's gone. As she pulls the door closed behind her, Oliver appears from the bathroom. He's still dressed in the same rumpled t-shirt and jeans that he'd had on yesterday, the same ones he'd worn to bed with her, the same ones that he really shouldn't be wearing if he was going to help her shower.

"Alright then," she says, bracing herself on the mattress. "Let's see what these dancing feet of mine can do."

With an unsteady hoist, Felicity pushes herself up off the bed. It turns out she can't do much. Her legs are unsteady but they don't give out. All the same, Oliver's there in a heartbeat. His arms wind around her waist, lifting her off her feet just enough, with an effortlessness that is breathtaking. She lets out a breathy laugh, grabbing his shoulders as he practically carries her into the bathroom.

Her conversation with her mother comes back to her. Swallowing down a sudden rush of emotion for this amazing man, Felicity just holds him tighter, leaning her head into his, relishing in the feeling of him - of his being there, taking care of her, loving her.

A month ago, she would have told him she could do this herself. And she would have - painfully and slowly.

But she has him, and it's…

Everything.

The bathroom's already swallowed up in steam. Oliver shuts the door behind them, trapping the humid air in with him before he sets her on her feet against the counter.

"Do you need anything?" he asks, delicately removing her glasses. He folds them with care and sets them on the counter before brushing her hair off her face. She shakes her head, and he presses a quick kiss to her forehead before he moves to step away, but she doesn't let him.

Felicity grabs the front of his shirt, keeping him in place with a soft hum. She pushes her arms around his waist and hugs him close, pressing her face into his chest. Oliver wraps her up with his own little noise, taking a deep breath. He presses his face into her hair, holding her tightly.

"I just need you," she whispers, her voice muffled against his shirt, right over his heart. She wonders if it's her imagination when she feels his heartbeat increase against her lips. "Just you."

"You have me," he replies, pulling back to look at her. Felicity tilts her head back, unwilling to let him go. His eyes dance over her face, his face softening with love and relief. He swallows audibly, and tears fill his eyes before he blinks them away. "You have me. Forever."

"I know," Felicity says. She fists his shirt with one hand, slipping the other underneath to feel his skin. She runs her fingers over his burn scar, smiling up at him. "And me, too. Forever."

Oliver takes an unsteady breath, relaxing into her. For that split second, he lets his guard down, letting her see everything he's been hiding from her. It's everything she heard and felt in him in the middle of the night when he was dreaming, everything he said when she first woke up… and it's everything he hasn't been saying.

The pain in his eyes is like a physical blow.

"Oliver," she whispers.

And just like that, it's all gone. The wall is back up and all that's shining out at her is the same love and relief and happiness. Felicity shakes her head, furrowing her brow, moving to continue, but he cuts her off.

"Let's get cleaned up."

Oliver presses a kiss to her forehead before turning away, forcing her to drop her hands.

She wants to push, just like she'd wanted to with Ellie. But as she watches him check on the water - almost meticulously, adjusting it until it's at the perfect temperature - and arrange the shower curtain so it's open just right to step through, and while he makes sure there's enough towels…

It's busywork. Something's *wrong,* but something else tells Felicity to not do anything about that, not yet. To let him be. So she does.

This moment needs to be about healing. The hard stuff can wait. It has to.

"You know," Felicity drawls. Her voice is surprisingly choked - okay, she is going to need some guidelines about emotions because it seems like everything is making her cry now. She clears her throat as Oliver turns to her. The blatant relief she'd seen on Ellie's face when she hadn't pushed isn't there, but based on his relaxed stance, he's grateful they don't have to go anywhere painful just yet. She nods to his clothes. "You're still pretty dressed for a shower. Unless you like the idea of peeling wet jeans off." That has her brightening. "Or, you know, maybe that's not a horrible idea. Sounds kinda fun actually. For me."

He chuckles, closing the distance between them. He pulls his t-shirt off, leaving him half-naked.

"Oh," Felicity breathes, much to his amusement, her eyes following the delightfully strict lines of his muscles down.

Some part of her wonders if he hasn't been eating that much because he looks thinner. It reminds her of when she first met him, when his idea of eating had been an apple and a power bar he'd had to force himself to eat at the end of the night. She'd read that was something people suffering from PTSD often did.

Had he not been eating?

Felicity pushes that thought aside - *for now* - and instead focuses on the fact that he isn't wearing a belt, and that his jeans are riding very low on his hips.

"Oh, that's… that's nice," she manages before Oliver's on her.

"I'm not the only one wearing too many clothes," he says, his voice low, low enough to make her shiver and bite her lip. He grabs the hem of her shirt - his shirt, really, although she's definitely claiming this one as her own along with the others she'd confiscated over the last few weeks - and pulls it up and off. Oliver hums, his eyes never leaving hers as his hands find her naked waist. "That's better."

"You know…" Felicity says, her eyes threatening to flutter shut. She fights them, not wanting to look away from him. "If I was a bit stronger right now, I'd be taking those pants right off."

His grin is absolutely beautiful, and slightly salacious as he nods. "I do know that. But I also know you're too weak for at the moment. Which means…" He slips his fingers into the band of her shorts. "No funny business."

Felicity snorts, and this time she can't keep her eyes open as he presses his palms flush to her hips, slipping them into her shorts. He pushes them down, taking her shorts with them… but that's it, that's all he does.

Like he knows exactly what she's thinking, Oliver gives her a soft kiss before whispering, "That's for later. For now, I just want to…"

He pauses, his lips lingering against hers. They tremble slightly against hers and she nods, understanding him completely.

Oliver unzips his jeans, pushing them and his boxers down. As they make their way to the shower - both of them taking their time, touching and caressing, never letting the other go - it quickly becomes evident that even if Felicity *wanted* to do more, she really, really doesn't have the energy for it.

But neither does he.

Oh, he has the physical part - he's pure strength as he holds them both up, as he shampoos her hair, as he takes extra care to put conditioner in before moving on to the soap. He barely shakes as he keeps her standing and gets her cleaned up. The only indication that he feels the extra weight at all comes when she wraps her arms around his neck and leans into him completely. His biceps flex slightly, in response, but Felicity knows that's nothing. And she knows there's something hidden beneath the surface, that just because he's standing as tall as he ever has, it doesn't mean that he isn't cracking inside.

She can *feel* it, in the way he touches her, the way he lingers. He's tender, handling her like she's both the most precious thing he's ever held and like she's made of glass.

A part of her wonders if he isn't the one made of glass.

Once they're done, he shuts the water off and doesn't even wait to see if she can walk. He picks her up, setting her down on the in-shower bench - it's not the same one they'd made love on in their last shower together, obviously. This one is smaller, more tucked in, but the reminder is there. It isn't lost on either of them how their roles have reversed since then. He's quick, grabbing a towel for himself, barely drying off before he wraps it around his waist.

But with her…

He's cautious, careful… loving and fearful at the same time.

Neither of them talk.

Felicity just watches him.

Once she's dried off, he helps her stand, wrapping the towel around her. And then he's picking her up again, and carrying her back out to the bedroom.

"Okay," Felicity says with a rueful laugh once they hit the clear air of their room. He doesn't stop until he's setting her on the edge of the bed. "I'm not a total invalid, Oliver."

"I know," he replies. "I just…"

The words trail off again. She fully expects him to sit down next to her, but he doesn't. He barely stops. He gives her a quick kiss but then he's moving back towards the bathroom.

Felicity grabs his hand, stopping him in his tracks with a soft, "Hey, hey, come back here."

"Yeah?" he asks, as if she's going to ask him to do something. As if he needs something to do. His eyes run over her, like he's searching for the source of her stopping him. "Do you…"

"I want you," she interrupts, "to sit down." She pulls on his hand, tugging him back to her. "Come on."

"Felicity…"

"What?" she asks. "Where are you going?"

"I'm… there's…"

"Okay, this is getting silly." His brow furrows at that, and she fights the urge to huff at his obvious obtuseness. "I've barely been awake for a few hours and I'm already done with the avoidance thing, Oliver." She doesn't miss the quick flash of irritation that covers his face. She pulls on his hand, tugging harder when he pulls back. "You didn't want to talk yesterday, which I get. I was still really out of it…"

"Felicity."

"And it's obvious that a lot happened," she continues, talking over him. "That's probably a massive understatement. So… come on." He's quiet. Oliver closes his eyes, ducking his head - away from her. He's shutting her out. Despite herself, despite knowing what he's doing, it hurts. She drops his hand. "Oliver."

"The only important thing right now is that you're okay," he says. "That's it."

"It is painfully obvious that that is so not the only thing going on."

"Felicity," Oliver snaps. The sharpness in his voice has her jerking back and a spark of anger coming to life in the pit of her stomach. "Stop. Please. We'll talk later. Okay? Just, for now… Let's just get you better, okay?"

"What don't you want to tell me?"

"Nothing," he says. "It's…"

It's ironic, is what it is, considering the conversation she just had with her mother about trust and letting him be there. What about her? What about him letting *her* be there for *him*? Having him there for her every step of the way is wonderful - it is - but it means nothing without her being able to return the sentiment. Right now he's blocking her, and it's pissing her off as much as it's making her want to retreat, which only pisses her off more.

Maybe her mom needs to have a talk with him, too.

"It's not nothing," Felicity retorts, that spark of anger quickly turning into more. "Because if it was nothing, then you wouldn't be trying to avoid me like this."

"I'm not avoiding you-"

"Maybe not in the physical sense, but you are definitely avoiding an actual conversation with me. What is going on?" He opens his mouth, but she cuts him off. "And if you say nothing again, Oliver, I swear…" His mouth snaps shut, but he doesn't say anything else. "Do you not think I can handle it? Or that I'm not ready yet? Or that you just have to handle everything on your own? Because if that's the case, Oliver, then we're going to-"

"That's not it."

"Then what is it?" she asks. "What happened? Is it Queen Consolidated? Did something happen with Slade, or Zoom?"

He closes his eyes in exasperation, turning away from her.

"Okay, fine," Felicity continues. "It wasn't them. So is it John, or Lyla? Or, or… Roy, or your mom? Or Thea?"

The instant his sister's name leaves her lips, the air in the room *changes*. Oliver's entire body stiffens as if she'd just shot him with a hundred volts of electricity. The muscles in his back twitch spastically, his hands becoming tight fists. But at the same time he somehow manages to curl in on himself - his shoulders fall and he scrubs his hands over his head.

"It's Thea," Felicity surmises. "It's… what happened to her? Did Malcolm hurt her?"

A sardonic laugh leaves his lips, but that's all she gets. That and a soft, "Felicity, please."

"What?" she asks. "What is it?"

"I can't do this, okay? It's not about telling you. It's just… I can't…" He pauses, his voice cracking. He doesn't turn around. "I just want to concentrate on you."

She almost gives in, she almost does. The pain in his voice alone almost stops her, but she doesn't. Because she can't - she *won't* - be okay with him avoiding conversations with her about things just because they're hard. That can't be how they work. That's not a future she accepts for them because that road ends in heartbreak and miscommunication and *damn* if she won't do anything to make sure that's not their reality.

"Oliver." Felicity stares at his back. "Tell me what happened."

The only indication he heard her is a slight tightening in his shoulders.

"Oliver-"

"I lost her, Felicity!" he erupts, spinning back to face her. Felicity's eyes widen, but he doesn't stop. "The night Malcolm came to steal our daughter, the night he came and hurt you so badly that I wasn't sure if you were going to survive, I lost my sister. Because I killed that son of a bitch. I killed that monster, because he *hurt* my family… and she saw it. She saw all of it. She watched me ram an arrow through his throat and she… she was… God, Felicity, Isabel injected her with mirakuru and she was…"

"Oh God," Felicity breathes.

"She was so *angry*… and she had every right to be. He was a monster but he was also her father and I can't blame her for hating me."

Felicity shakes her head, because *no*, but he doesn't see it.

"I knew what I was doing, and I don't regret it, because he was going to take Ellie. He wouldn't have given up. I couldn't let him have her, Felicity, I couldn't. And when I saw you, you were so still. I wasn't even sure you were breathing, and I… The only thing I wanted to do was kill him. I wanted to kill him so badly I could taste it, more than I've ever wanted to kill anyone. But… but she… she saw me do it."

Ignoring the weakness in her legs, Felicity stands and moves towards him. "Oliver…"

But he steps back, shaking his head, his face wrenched with agony.

"The things she said to me… God, she's *right*. And then she left, she ran from me. She ran from me, and I haven't been able to find her. *I can't find her*. My baby sister is out there with poison in her veins, and it's my fault. I did this to her."

"That's not…"

He slashes his hand through the air. "No, Felicity, stop! Nothing will make this okay. *Nothing*. I've tried. I've tried finding her, tried to help her, tried *everything*, but there's *nothing*. She's in the wind. So all I could do was sit here, praying that you'd wake up, terrified that Ellie

might… that she might… I spent every single night holding her so hard as I watched you. I was afraid if I closed my eyes, that you'd stop breathing, and if you stopped… and Ellie disappeared…"

She remembers that horror all too well. The thought of him sitting up every single night, just waiting for Ellie to fade away… She hates it, she hates that he had to go through that with every fiber of her being.

"So, no, Felicity, I don't want to talk about this. I *can't*. Because when you opened your eyes that first time… God, I was so relieved. And *grateful*. How is it right that I get to feel this way, that I get to have all of this when Thea's out there?" His voice cracks. "Why do I get to be happy when she's not, because of me?"

Felicity can't stop the sob from falling from her lips.

"I lost her, I lost her and I don't know how to get her back."

She finally reaches him, and this time he lets her.

They wrap themselves around each other, as hard as they can. He shoves his face into her neck, his shoulders shaking, his tears soaking into her hair and skin as he holds her so tight it hurts. She cradles him, whispering things, anything that comes to her mind, just holding him.

"It's not just that," he whispers. His voice is rough. "I was so scared, Felicity. I was terrified you weren't going to wake up, that you weren't coming back to me. And I can't do this without you, I can't. And Ellie…" He starts trembling as he shakes his head. "She's been so upset, so angry. She blames me, I know she does."

Felicity tries to pull back to look at him but he won't let her go. "Oliver, no."

"I don't hold it against her. She's right," Oliver says, ignoring her as he shakes his head against her. "Nothing's been *right*, not since that bastard tried to take her. Since he hurt you. God, if I could kill him all over again, I would."

"I know."

"He was going to hurt her… but Thea. God, Thea, she… I just can't win, Felicity. I can't *win*, and I hate it. But then…"

"I know," she breathes, hugging him. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"I love you, Felicity, I love you so much."

"I love you," she murmurs. He shudders, squeezing her like he's trying to hold onto her words. "And we're going to find Thea. We will." A tiny sound comes from deep in his chest before he nods. She pulls back again, but he still doesn't let go. She whispers his name, urging him to pull back so she can see him. When he finally does, it's reluctant. She cups his face with unsteady hands. "I love you."

"I love you," he breathes out again before kissing her. It's not soft, not by any means. Desperation underlies every single move, one that has it quickly turning into more. Felicity whimpers, pushing her hands back into his hair, gripping tightly. He gives her a needy moan, dropping his hand down her back, gripping the towel as he presses her even closer.

It spirals, quickly. Heat unfurls deep inside her, making her shake with its intensity. It doesn't matter that she just woke up the day before, or that this is being fueled by emotions that leave her feeling like she's being burned alive…

The only thing that matters is feeling, and they both give it their all.

But then it's over just as quickly as it started.

They part, both of them panting. Felicity stares up at him with heavy-lidded eyes. "What is it?"

"I think we're about to have company," he whispers. The words are ragged, but they're a little bit lighter. It's not much, but it's *something*. "C'mon."

They make it back to the bed just as someone knocks on the door. Ellie's soft, "*Hurry*," is heard from the other side of the door, and the sound has the heaviness in the air evaporating just before the door opens. The knock indicated an adult, but the only person who comes in is their daughter, balancing a plastic bowl of soup. It's barely filled, just enough for the little girl to have carried all the way from the kitchen. She's being extra quiet, more so than usual, and it's obvious she's expecting a very different world than the one she'd left.

"What you got there, Ellie-bug?" Oliver asks, causing Ellie to look up.

The happiness that crosses her face at the sight of her parents sitting on the bed - both of them wide-awake - is a sight Felicity will remember for the rest of her life.

"You're still awake!" she says, suddenly moving quicker, soup be damned.

Oliver lets out a quiet, "Whoa, let's get that out of there," as he takes the soup from her just before Ellie throws herself at her mother.

With a laugh, Felicity catches her, as best she can. Oliver sets the bowl on the ground before helping the little girl crawl all the way up into Felicity's lap.

"You're still awake, Momma," she repeats. "Just like you promised!" The wonder in her tone is evident, but before Felicity can respond, Ellie turns to Oliver. "Daddy, Momma's awake."

"I know, baby," he replies, rubbing her back.

"You said she would be and she is," Ellie declares. With a delighted grin, she turns to Oliver, practically throwing herself at him as well until she's wrapped around both of them. She kisses Oliver's cheek. "Thank you, Daddy."

Another look Felicity will remember forever?

The one on Oliver's face as he and his daughter find the same page again.

Chapter 33

It takes two days before there's more frustration than exhaustion living in her bones.

She'd wound up sleeping through most of the first day, waking up every few hours to find either Ellie or Oliver by her side. She loved when it was both of them, especially because Ellie spent her time telling stories and performing 'shows' at the foot of her bed. It never failed to bring a smile to Oliver's face, a smile that was blinding whenever she involved him in her story-telling.

But there's only so much time just lying there that Felicity can take. She's getting *antsy*, anxious to do something, anything, really. Lying in bed lost its appeal about two seconds after she'd woken up the first time. The only real thing keeping her there had been Oliver's face when she'd started talking about getting up and moving - "*There really isn't a rush, Felicity. Take some time, get better, let your body heal."* That, and the fact that actual movement was exhausting.

But now that she's feeling much improved, it's time. There's work to do, especially because they still haven't found Thea. There hasn't been so much as a whisper about Slade. The destruction of Queen Consolidated is still front and center in the news, even with Moira's focus as Starling City's newly installed mayor honed in on the problem. There's so much Felicity could be doing to help.

If she could just reach her tablet or a laptop…

Rather, if *Ellie* could.

"Daddy put it really high," her daughter whispers. It's more stage-whisper status, but despite the volume, Oliver slumbers on next to them. "He put it on a high shelf in the office, where I can't go unless I climb and it's super naughty to climb up there, even if I *could*. Daddy said I can't have it because it's not mine. But you *do* let me use it, Momma. I can treat 'lectronics nicely. And I told him that."

In the future, that is. Part of Felicity is glad that Oliver kept it away from Ellie - she'd let the toddler use it once about a week and a half ago and *someone* - there are many suspects on Felicity's list and recent events haven't made her forget about the incident - had given her some chocolate. The memory of trying to clean the extremely high quality chocolate out of the grooves along the tablet's edge makes

Felicity shudder. It also makes her suspect Moira, because her own mom would have been handing out Hershey's, not imported Belgian truffles. They haven't taken the time to make an Ellie-optimized piece of tech for her here, so she is glad her precious electronics are out of her daughter's grubby-fingered reach, but part of her is also is a little frustrated because that means Ellie can't bring her a tablet.

She wouldn't be surprised if that had been part of the plan to force her to rest, too.

Oliver clearly knows them both too well.

"I'm sorry, Momma," Ellie says, patting her cheek in consolation.

"That's okay," Felicity replies with a smile, turning to kiss her little fingers before she can take her hand back. She nips at them, making Ellie giggle. "Daddy's just being cautious." Under her breath she adds, "A little *overly* cautious."

"Because he loves us," Ellie says, her voice chipper and absolute.

Her certainty of that fact is unwavering. As is Felicity's.

"Yes," Felicity replies with a nod, her smile growing. "He does."

He really, really does. His actions have more than proven that fact. It's been even more pronounced over the last few days, in his gentle, lingering touch and the way he softens when he looks at his family, the hard lines of stress smoothing out across his brow when he walks around the room with Felicity or helps Ellie bring up soup.

God, she's sick of soup. She wants a Big Belly Buster with extra fries and the biggest strawberry milkshake they have. Stat. Maybe *that's* what the new baby needs. Strawberry milkshakes and fries. She's content to give the little one credit, anyhow, and she's fairly certain that when Oliver wakes up it means he'll cave and let her off of her broth-centric diet.

Felicity knows he just wants to make sure she's okay, that he doesn't want her pushing herself too hard. Which she gets - she is still aggravatingly tired, something she's beginning to think is just in her head because she'd been *fine* before Malcolm had attacked. This couldn't possibly be about the baby, right? But according to Caitlin it is perfectly normal to feel extra tired in the first few weeks. And she did get poisoned and knocked out, courtesy of a nasty blow to the head. So she has every right to be tired.

She can be tired *and* productive, damn it. And she can definitely do it with fries and a shake.

The sun is barely starting to peek over the horizon. The room slowly lightens, going from an ashy gray to a deep pink and dusky orange. It's a testament to how much she's been sleeping lately that she's up at this ungodly hour.

It occurs to Felicity that Oliver is usually the first one up.

"I think…" Felicity whispers, bopping Ellie's nose softly. The little girl scrunches her face up in response. "We should make Daddy breakfast."

Ellie's eyes widen with excitement. "Yeah!" She immediately claps her hand over her mouth when she realizes how loud she is. She glances at Oliver before looking back to Felicity, but then she pauses. Her little brows furrow. "Are you gonna cook it, Momma?" Felicity snorts to keep her laugh at bay. Ellie's quick to add, "We can go get something!"

"No, no," Felicity replies with a chuckle. "We don't have to do that." It will always be amusing knowing her cooking abilities do not improve in the future. "How about we see if Grandma Moira or Raisa is up? Maybe make some pancakes…" She raises her eyebrows for effect. "Or some waffles…"

"Waffles!" Ellie announces with a grin. "With strawberries!"

"Shh, shh." Felicity glances behind her, but Oliver hasn't budged an inch. "Waffles sound perfect, Ellie-bug. Daddy would love that."

"Yeah!" Ellie whispers with gusto. There's a sheen of pride-in-the-making that covers her face as she scrambles up to her knees, moving to the edge of the bed. "I'll go find my Grammas."

"Hey, wait for me," Felicity says, throwing the comforter back and moving to follow, but Ellie stops at the last second, spinning around.

"No, Momma, you need to *rest*. Daddy says so." Felicity barely keeps herself from huffing in irritation at that, and she almost rolls her eyes before closing them instead. Ellie drops to her stomach and scoots back off the bed, keeping her eye on Felicity the entire time, as if making sure she won't follow her. "I'mma help my Grammas and I'll bring you and Daddy breakfast in bed!"

"Not by yourself, please," Felicity says as Ellie hustles to the door.

She won't be forgetting the Soup Incident of Yesterday anytime soon. Her daughter had taken it upon herself to tuck a glass of water in her arm and hold a bowl of soup instead of waiting for Oliver to help. It'd ended with soup all over an Oriental rug that Felicity was pretty sure cost more than her car. When Oliver had described the scene to her, the first almost-irrational thing that'd come flying out of Felicity's mouth was, "*Should we replace it?*" Which was just dumb. Although the 'we' that'd come out so naturally - as if she and Oliver were already one unit in every possible way - had filled her chest with warmth. She'd seen the same thing on Oliver's face when he shot her a smile before saying, "*I'm pretty sure my mom has a stack of them in the basement somewhere.*"

"I know," Ellie replies, opening the door with an exaggerated slowness that makes the hinges squeak. She winces, her eyes darting back to her father's sleeping form. When she sees he hasn't woken up yet, she looks at Felicity. "I'll be careful. Promise!"

"Oh!" Felicity sits up quickly, leaning over to the nightstand to grab the little girl's tachyon detector. It's a clunky little thing, but over the last few days she and Ellie had taken to adding some doo-dads - fairies and rainbows, because that's where the fairies have been staying since Ellie hasn't been to the treehouse in a "*really long while.*" It's helped temper some of the raw terror that comes along with the blaring alarm the thing lets out when a breach occurs somewhere nearby. It's a weird thing to realize that breaches in the time-space continuum are becoming a normal occurrence. Felicity waves at Ellie, who comes back dutifully. "Don't forget your necklace."

"Thanks, Momma," Ellie says as Felicity puts over her head. She pats one of the fairy adornments. "They would be upset if I left them."

Felicity leans over, grabbing her daughter's waist to tug her closer. "Hurry back," she says before planting a wet kiss on her cheek.

Ellie readily returns the kiss with a, "I will!" before running for the door again.

The last thing Felicity hears before her daughter closes the door behind her is, "Time to make waffles!" And then she's gone, off to find her grandmothers - hopefully not to wake them, although something tells Felicity that neither Moira nor Donna would mind in the least.

And that leaves just her and Oliver.

With a heavy sigh, Felicity lays back down, settling in again.

It takes her all of five seconds to know that she won't be able to lay there as promised, letting Oliver sleep soundly while she waits for their daughter to bring food back.

She rolls onto her side. It's amazing how *good* the simple movement feels; the ability to move without feeling the lag of exhaustion is glorious. Felicity settles in again, this time with her eyes on Oliver. He's out cold, his features lax with sleep, his muscles relaxed and at ease, his lips parted as gentle puffs of air ghost across her cheek. He's on his side, facing her, one arm shoved under the pillow, the other loose between them. It'd been wrapped around her when she'd woken up, spooned back against him with Ellie glued to her front. She loves this closeness with him, has found it's quickly become addicting. Felicity scoots closer to him now, seeking his warmth, wrapping her leg around his, and trapping his hand between them.

He still doesn't move.

For several minutes, she watches the slow, steady rise of his chest, the way his muscles twitch. Even asleep he's a force to be reckoned with, a steady hum of strength and power beneath the surface that makes her skin tingle in anticipation. But one thing is different about him in sleep: how *young* he looks. It will always amaze her how the years melt away when he's not on guard all the time. And he has been, constantly, since the moment they met, since before that even, but it's been more extreme lately. The lines are still there - crinkles in his forehead, around his mouth, his worry and fear like a brand on his face. He's been hiding behind his happiness that she's finally awake - hiding his tension and fear and worry for Thea. It's not something he's been hiding from *her*, exactly, more like he's been trying to bury it from himself. Talking only goes so far and there's been painfully little progress in tracking his wayward sister down. As joyful as some of their moments might be, he still stops suddenly and pain flashes across his eyes when he realizes how hard he's laughing at something Ellie's said.

As long as Thea's out there, *somewhere*, it won't stop. The only thing that will let him truly relax is finding his sister, making sure she's okay, *making* her okay, getting her the cure.

All the more reason for Felicity to get back in the game. God, that Isabel injected Thea with mirakuru twists her insides. If the despot of a former CEO had fallen with Queen Consolidated, Felicity's pretty sure the world would have been a better place for it.

If Felicity can help bring Thea home for him, if she can watch all that terror melt away when he sees she's okay - because she is; she will be; she has to be - then facing the wrath of her own muscles getting angry with over-exhaustion will be worth it.

She just needs her damn tablet.

And the one person she wants to help the most is standing in her way.

He honestly thinks he's helping her, too, which makes it both harder to be angry and heartbreaking.

For a split second, Felicity considers waking him. Telling him she's feeling better, that it's time, and that she won't be taking no for an answer. But she can't bring herself to rouse him, not for that. She wants to let him sleep because as much as she's needed rest, so has he. He hasn't had anymore nightmares - that she knows of - but he hasn't exactly been sleeping easily either. And this is the first time he hasn't woken up before her and Ellie. It's actually the first time he hasn't responded to their voices at all.

He's *out*, which tells her that he sees she's also getting better. He wouldn't have let himself fall that deep in slumber if he thought something was still wrong with her.

Biting her lip, Felicity stares at him.

There are other ways for him to relax.

She glances at the closed door and then the clock. They have time. If she's quick.

Felicity licks her lips, the thought of what she has in mind making her suddenly feel very, very warm. A deep tug pulls at her stomach, a thin thread of arousal unfurling there. She squeezes her thighs together, shifting slightly, right against him.

He doesn't budge.

Well then…

She cups his cheek. His skin is hot against her palm and she delights in it, enjoying the way his stubble plays against her fingertips and palm. He'd shaved the night before last, losing the beard he'd grown as she'd slept, but not since. It's already getting long again, and she likes it. A lot. Felicity drags her fingers down his cheek, scratching at his

beard, whispering his name softly. He doesn't respond. Without another word, she keeps going, down his jaw, down his neck, licking her lips again when his body reacts. He may be asleep, but some part of him knows she's there. She knows the feeling - it's an unearthly awareness of each other.

When she reaches his collarbone, Oliver shifts slightly. Felicity pauses, her eyes flying to his face. She feels his fingers twitching between them, as if they want to reach for her, but that's it. He lets out a soft sigh, relaxing even more under her touch, before settling in again.

Felicity pushes on his shoulder, urging him back. It takes a second for him to respond - and God, he's *heavy* - but just when she's about to use both hands, he moves. She follows him, pulling the sheet out of the way. As Oliver readjusts, stretching his body languidly, she sprawls her hands over his chest, moving one down his abdomen. A tiny sound comes from deep in his chest as he arches into her touch.

He's still asleep.

She starts at his neck, dropping featherlight kisses at the base of his jaw and down, licking his pulse point, making her way to his collarbone, to his chest. She presses wet, open-mouthed kisses over his pecs, wrapping her lips around one nipple - something that makes his hips jerk, but he still doesn't wake - before licking her way down his abs. Her tongue finds every groove in his finely-cut muscle, savoring every bit of him that she finds.

He smells like *Oliver*, like her… like warmth and sunshine and happiness. Like *home*.

Felicity pushes the sheet out of her way as she goes down, pausing long enough to turn around so she's facing the slowly growing hardness in his sweats. The movement has her thighs pressing together tightly as she kneels next to him, settling back on her heels.

Hooking her thumbs in the band of his sweats, she gently tugs them down.

A few seconds later, Oliver comes awake with a sharp gasp, his hips coming up off the bed as he thrusts into her mouth.

She grips the base of his length tightly, controlling his movements just as much as she makes room to take as much of him as she can. She swirls her tongue around him, stiffening it to rub along the sensitive underside before scraping her teeth over the tender slit at the tip.

"Oh God, Felicity," he chokes out, his hands flying to her head. He pushes her hair out of the way clumsily, still half-asleep. She looks up just as he looks down at her. He must enjoy the sight because his already hooded lids grow heavier with need, his eyes latching onto her lips where they're wrapped around him. His voice is delicious - deep and raspy - as he asks, "Are we…?"

She releases him with a little pop, which makes him whimper and his hips jerk involuntarily. Her mouth hovers over him, and when she repeats, "Are we…?" her breath dances over his wet flesh, making him shiver.

"Are we… where's…?" he manages. He can barely string the words together.

"We're alone," she confirms, dragging her tongue over the tip of his erection. He curses under his breath, his fingers tightening in her hair. "Just you… and me…"

Felicity wraps her lips around him again, tasting him thoroughly.

Oliver curses, his hips thrusting up of their own volition. His head falls back against the pillow, his body tightening as he fights for control. It's been so long though - for them, at least. And on top of that add mortal danger, enough emotional trauma to last a lifetime, and finding each other again, leaning on each other, being there…

It's too much, and it doesn't take long before his moans grow louder, filling the room along with breathless whimpers of her name interspersed with pleas for her to not stop. She doesn't. She builds him up, ignoring the soft twinges in her muscles and jaw when she begins to tire. It's easy, especially as her own arousal grows rapidly inside her, making her feel hot and needy.

She doesn't see him move. She feels him letting go of her hair, feels him fisting the sheet when she sucks on him particularly hard, hears him hissing a colorful range of curse words that make her grin… but she doesn't see him moving until his hand lands on her back. She gasps, her thighs clenching together tightly.

Oliver slips it down her backside, finding her naked thigh. The instant his fingers touch her heated skin, she lifts herself up, just enough, and then he's pushing his fingers into her sleep shorts and between her thighs. She doesn't feel her muscles shaking from the exertion or the acidic burn of overuse. She only feels *him*.

It isn't long before they're both falling to pieces, their muffled cries echoing against the walls.

Two hours later - really, two orgasms, a hot makeout session, a short blissful nap, and a ridiculous amount of waffles doused in strawberries later - the bubble they'd hidden themselves in bursts.

Felicity can't hide her exasperated huff as Caitlin helps her stand. "I'm *fine*."

Oliver, however, clearly doesn't agree.

"There really isn't a reason to rush," he says, his own brand of aggravation coloring his tone. He hurries to her side to help support her, gripping her elbow. The look on his face says he's terrified she won't be able to hold herself upright. And really, it's a valid concern. She wants to be annoyed with him, and she would be if she wasn't leaning against him out of necessity.

There's very, very little Felicity hates more than feeling helpless. Especially after a *full week* of being helpless. No, it's been *more* than a week. She's going to get up, damn it, and she's going to *do things*.

"My sanity disagrees," she argues. Her tone is sarcastic, but she means what she says. "And we need to find Thea."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know, Felicity," he replies with a little more bite than he intends, she's sure of it. He looks sheepish for a second before offering, "How about I bring the laptop to you?"

Felicity grips his shirt for balance as she puts more weight on her feet. "It's not just that, Oliver, it's… I need to get up, and move, and do human life things. I might fall on my face, but at least I'll be moving." His shoulders stiffen, his mouth opening to argue more and she stops, looking up at him with a pointed finger. "I can't lay in that bed anymore, Oliver. I won't. I'm going *crazy*."

Oliver stares at her, and she knows he can see it. She is reaching the end of her rope, on the most basic level ever. Add to it that she wants to be helping them, knowing she can find Thea if given a few hours and her wi-fi.

She *needs* this.

His agitation fades, but his anxiety and worry doesn't. He lets out a

soft huff, wanting to argue, but knowing she's right. He'd better know she's right. Because she is. In this instance, she really, really is.

"Her blood work all looks good," Caitlin reminds him. Felicity waves at the doctor in a '*see?*' motion. "Whatever Merlyn gave her is out of her system. But she won't start feeling back to normal until she starts doing more normal things. She'll need to rest a lot still, but she should start getting back to her daily routine as best as she can."

"See?" Felicity asks. He presses his mouth into a grim line. With a nod that's more for show than anything, she forces herself to let go, focusing on maintaining her balance without aid. It's unfamiliar, leaving her feeling like a newborn giraffe who can't quite sort out how to stand. But after a moment, she steadies, her legs slowly feeling less and less like jello. With a triumphant smile, she looks at Oliver. "There we go!"

His grim look doesn't go away, but she does catch a glimpse of pride and maybe even admiration in his eyes.

"These are doctor's orders, mister," Felicity adds. "I'm being a good patient. *Continuing* to be a good patient. I stayed in bed, like she said, but now…" She puts her hands on her hips, going for a triumphant pose. The only problem is she doesn't quite realize just how much she was using her hands for balance until they're gone. With a little, "Meep!" she starts to sway. Oliver instantly moves to grab her but she shakes her head with a, "No, no, I got it." And she does, her legs steadying again. "There!"

Oliver sighs, his brow wrinkling further in concern. Pressing his lips together tightly, he nods. There's no part of this he likes. She finds herself hoping it's because of the poison and not because of the pregnancy. If he's going to be like this for the next eight months, she might lose her mind entirely. And wouldn't several months of *that* be fun.

Felicity smiles brightly at him, and despite himself, he smiles back.

"I can do this, Oliver."

His voice is soft as he replies, "I know." He leaves out the, '*I just don't want you to have to,*' part.

"Don't push it, though," Caitlin counsels. The look she gives Felicity makes her feel like she's being scolded by her mother for taking apart the VCR at six all over again. "You'll feel like you should be able to do

more than you can. And it's not just your body you're taxing, remember."

Oh *fantastic*. That's exactly what Oliver needed to hear.

"Let me help," Oliver says. He steps closer, his hands finding her waist. He rubs her back, lowering his voice just for her. "We're a team, remember? I know you want to do this yourself, that you need to prove to yourself that you can. And you will. You are one of the strongest people I know. But you need to get back to one hundred percent, okay? So for now, let me help, at least to the office. We'll work together." He stares at her, dropping his hand down to her lower back. He rubs gentle circles into the muscles there. It's like he knows they're already getting stiff and kinda cranky. "I need your help to find Thea. So please let me help you."

He's laying it on thick, and they both know it. But there's also a desperation on his face that's enough to tell her that while he knows exactly what he's doing, he's also being incredibly sincere at the same time. And it's enough to make her cave. She feels her resolve slipping away, crumbling in the face of his pleas.

"Okay," she relents. The strain marring his face instantly disappears, and his next smile is bigger. "But if this keeps up past my first trimester, we're having words. Lots of them. In my loud voice."

The hand on her back freezes, his relieved concern melting into obvious confusion. It's edged with hurt, something that's only amplified when he frowns at her. It all makes her feel bad because, really, he's only concerned about her. But she also has the sense that his concern could easily smother her if she let it. And if they're going to go the long haul with this relationship - and it's pretty clear they are - they're going to have to lay a few ground rules. Not mother henning her is absolutely one of them.

"I'm just trying to help, Felicity," he says, his voice so quiet it's obvious she's hit him where it hurts. Add that to what's happened over the last week and a half, and yeah, she sort of feels like she just kicked a puppy.

Oliver is not the most verbose guy, which means his way of showing love is through action. And she just telegraphed that she doesn't want it. She knows it's coming from a good place, that he's been hovering for days because he loves her, but it also has serious potential to be completely stifling.

"I know," Felicity replies. She leans into him, both because she's kind of about to fall over, but also to show him she is willing to rely on him when she needs to. It just can't be exclusively. She's not that person, she never has been, and standing on her own two feet - literally right now - is vital. "I know that. And I love you for it. But you have to let me breathe, too, Oliver."

This isn't just about helping her stand and walk *now*. This is about how they handle *everything*, about the next year and the next fifty years. If they're going to be each other's forever and always, then these are the kinds of conversations they need to have. Love is easy. Passion is simple. But living with someone, raising children together and being a family? That takes a whole lot more than just love and passion. Though, admittedly, it's a damned good place to start.

He hears her. He soaks her words in with an intensity that belies his understanding of how important they are. His eyes reflect it back at her as he steps back, giving her the space she needs. He keeps his hand on her back though, and she knows it's more for him than anything.

"Okay," he agrees. "I'll follow your lead. You let me know how I can help and I will stick to that. But I reserve the right to tell you if I think you're pushing yourself too much, okay?"

"And I reserve the right to tell you when I don't think I am," Felicity replies with a brightness that undermines the slight instigation in her words. She's teasing him, but despite that, Oliver's eyes narrow as his fingers curl into her tank top. "And then you'll tell me I am, and I'll probably argue a little bit…" He snorts at that. "Because I'll be in the middle of a project. But eventually I'll agree, and you'll agree, and then I'll remind you that you have to give me the same deal when it's *you* who's pushing too hard…" She raises her eyebrows at him, emphasizing the meaning of her own request. She can actually see how involuntary his smile is; he just can't help it as he grins at her. "And then we'll have makeup sex. Which I *know* will be amazing."

"You know it, huh?" Oliver asks, his eyes darting to Caitlin.

A blush warms Felicity's face, but she doesn't back down. "Yes. I know it. And," she adds, turning to look at Caitlin, "I'm so sorry that my brain-to-mouth filter seems to be broken around you." The young woman simply smiles, shaking her head. "I think it's a sign that I'm so comfortable with you, so yay for that."

"Thank you," Caitlin replies, taking it as the compliment Felicity intended.

"So…" Felicity starts, turning back to Oliver.

He nods. "You got it."

She smiles, nodding in return. "Good. It's a deal then." For a long moment, he stares at her, shaking his head slightly in wonder, like he can't quite believe that this is his life. Felicity leans into his chest, knowing he'll be there to catch her, to hold her. And he is. "Believe it," she whispers, scrunching her nose slightly.

Oliver chuckles, a gentle sound that is beautifully sincere.

Biting her lip, Felicity tilts her head up to kiss him.

Relief floods her at the soft press of his lips against hers. It's unity and mutual support, leaving her feeling even-keeled and solid, like she's buoying him as much as he is her. She needs that. This can't be one-sided. Not now, not ever. She won't let it.

As they part, he whispers, "Thank you," against her lips. She smiles back, the curve of her lips brushing against his.

"Mmm," she hums, meeting his gaze. "Thank *you*." She's well aware this conversation could have gone very differently.

Oliver's smile matches hers as he nods, kissing her again. This one's even better than the first, still just as soft but with so much meaning behind it that it makes her limbs tingle.

Somewhere in the background, Caitlin clears her throat. They break away from each other with sheepish smiles, Oliver instantly turning to apologize to Caitlin. When Felicity sees the light pink tinge on his cheeks, she chuckles. Because it's perfect. And because she and Caitlin sort of just came to an understanding - at least that's what she's considering it - she cups Oliver's face and pulls him down just enough so she can kiss his heated cheekbone.

They do have a slight problem with remembering the world is made up of more than just them. And by problem she means tendency, and by slight she means not at all.

Oliver turns into her just enough to nuzzle against her temple.

"So," Felicity says, turning back to Caitlin. She steps away from Oliver, but she doesn't release her hold on him. Because all that balance is a little exhausting, and because she knows if she did want to let go right now and go for it on her own, he'd let her. "Taking it easy is the-"

But Caitlin's not the only one looking to make her presence known. No, not even close.

"*Momma*!"

Ellie barrels into the room, a whirlwind of blonde curls and a bright toothy grin. She skids to a stop just as she crosses the threshold, her eyes widening at the sight of her mother standing mostly unaided. Whatever she'd been ready to say disappears as she takes Felicity in. Her eyes linger on Felicity's legs, like she's afraid they're going to collapse underneath her, before looking back at her.

"You're better?" she asks, her voice coated with innocent skepticism. God, she's like a miniature Oliver with that attitude. Another thing to talk to him about later.

Felicity smiles. "I'm definitely getting there, sweetie." She takes a step towards her daughter, and she's so pleased and grateful when Oliver simply follows because she's holding his hand. Ellie shoots towards her and Felicity's free hand flies up to ward her off with a sharp, "Whoa, whoa!" The toddler skids to another step, her brow furrowing. "You have to keep being gentle with me though, okay? Which means no climbing or jumping up."

Ellie narrows her eyes. "But Daddy said you needed to keep resting."

He *did* say that.

Felicity and Ellie both turn to him for an explanation and this time his blush is a different color, in light of their recent conversation.

"I did say that, Ellie-bug," Oliver says. "And she did rest. Now it's time for her to get up and move around, to get her strength back."

Ellie simply stares at him, trying to discern if he's telling the truth. Felicity has to bite the inside of her lip to keep from chuckling at the intensity on her little face. Especially when her hands find her little hips and she looks at Caitlin for more reassurance.

"Really?" she asks, with so much sass and disbelief that it leaves Felicity wondering if it's something she picked up from her Aunt Thea,

or if it's one of those Queen genetic things.

"Really," Caitlin confirms with a gentle smile. "You've done an excellent job looking after her, Ellie." That has Ellie's stance softening into a preen as the doctor continues, "She's improving wonderfully. She'll probably still tire out pretty quickly and it might be difficult for her to get around easily, but a few more days and she'll be good as new."

Ellie takes a moment to mull that over, her eyes finding Felicity. But then she nods, very seriously. It's clear her trust in Caitlin's expertise is absolute. She's clearly still wary, as she has every right to be - this is her mother, and things had been *so* bad for so long. But she believes in Caitlin anyhow.

"Okay," Ellie decides with another decisive nod. "I'll watch you, Momma, and make sure you don't get too sleepy."

Her father's distinctive chuckle rumbles from beside Felicity. He squeezes her hand softly before leaning over to press a kiss to her shoulder. She can feel the smile on his lips, and it's not hard to figure out what has him grinning like that. Felicity just got done telling him she needs space and getting him to agree that hovering helps nothing, only to have Ellie come in and do that very thing. She is every inch her father's daughter.

But it's easier to bear when it's her.

Felicity's pretty sure she wouldn't begrudge Ellie anything, but definitely not her concern. She's been through a lot - more than a lot - and it's only natural that the instinctive need to protect that she's seen from Ellie over the last few weeks extends to watching over her injured mother. It's part of what makes Ellie… *Ellie*. And Felicity wouldn't change anything about her little girl for the world.

"Thank you," Felicity says with a warm smile. "You know what would be a really big help right now though?" Ellie perks up, eager to please. "If you could go make sure there isn't anything I'm going to trip on between here and the office. Can you do that for me?"

"Yep!" Ellie says with a firm nod. Her face narrows into a serious look that is so blatantly Oliver that it leaves Felicity grinning as the little girl adds, "I'm on it!" before turning and running out of the room.

"I think I'll go help," Caitlin says, moving to follow in a move that is obviously meant to give them some space. She pauses before she

reaches the door though, giving Felicity a stern look. "Easy."

"Easy," Felicity repeats, and then the other woman is gone.

Oliver steps up beside her, squeezing her hand while sliding his other across her waist to curl his fingers around her side, just above her hip. It's steadying and it's only when he's right there that she realizes her legs are a little bit shaky. But it's more than that - it's affectionate, a loving grasp in response to the ball of energy that is their child, and she's so grateful for that. She leans into his sturdy frame and breathes deeply, savoring his scent and the scurry of little feet down the hall. Not for the first time she silently thanks Cisco for the tachyon detector, for her daughter's freedom to run around and fill the house with the *life* she so effortlessly embodies.

It hits her again: she gets to keep this. Him, their family, the riotous joy of children running through the house. The realization has been slamming into her at unexpected moments lately, but it's always accompanied by a surge of excitement and joy.

She honestly hadn't know she could want this so badly.

Without conscious thought, Felicity's hand settles against her abdomen. She's been doing that a lot over the last two days, marveling at the idea of a *baby* in there. Had she not see the blood work herself and realized she had, in fact, missed a period, she'd have had no clue. If the only indicator had been a serious lack of Aunt Flo, she would have simply attributed it to stress, of which there was plenty all around. It wouldn't be the first time, that's for sure. And she hasn't had any nausea or dizziness or moodiness…

A baby.

Oliver leans in closer, kissing her temple. "Let's hope the next one has a little less energy," he says, his voice soft.

Felicity looks at him to find his eyes fixed on her hand where it rests against the still-flat plain of her stomach. He's thrilled about the pregnancy, he's made that abundantly clear. But it still surprises her to see the intensity of his happiness whenever they stop to recognize their child's presence. To see the pure *delight* shining from his eyes, the way his face softens, becomes lighter. The one truly bright spot through everything that's happened is this right here, and it never, ever fails to center him. To center *them*.

"She can be as energetic as she wants," Felicity replies with a smile.

"As long as she's healthy." She sighs, following his gaze and scratching at her stomach gently. "I just… I can't wait to meet her."

"Her, huh?" he asks.

"Well," Felicity says, "that's Ellie's take on things, so I'm rolling with it for now."

"Okay," he agrees with a nod - now it's his turn to look like Ellie, Felicity notes with amusement. He kisses her forehead, lingering as he adds with a serene happiness, "I can live with that."

So can she.

With a sigh, Felicity turns, wrapping herself around him. It's just one hug, a simple hug, that's all. Because this is their life, a life they're both so *happy* with, a life they both want. That's worthy of a quick hug.

Oliver more than returns the gesture, pulling her flush against him. His lips make a soft trail over her brow, down to her temple and cheek. It's amazing how her nerves tingle even at the softest touches from him, how it always makes her want more. He curls himself around her and Felicity almost - *almost* - gives in. She almost turns her face up to find his lips, almost talks herself into thinking that one or two more kisses wouldn't hurt anything… but she can't.

They can't.

"We should get moving," Felicity says, her voice muffled against him. She bunches up his shirt at his back, tugging on it for emphasis. "Those searches aren't going to run themselves."

Oliver tenses, just like she knew he would, his fingers curling tighter against her waist.

He's torn and she knows it. On one hand, he's desperate to find his sister, to cure her and bring her home. The hole Thea's left in his heart is a gaping wound and to say he's taken her absence hard is an understatement. On the other hand, he's so very aware of Felicity's limitations right now and his desire to see her safe and healing is absolutely his top priority.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?" he ventures cautiously.

Felicity rolls her eyes before pulling back to look at him. "It's an

internet search," she points out. "Not the salmon ladder. Not that I could do *that* even in peak form, but the point stands. As do I. Literally. But only right now, because once we get downstairs, I'll be sitting." She flattens her hands over his chest, staring into his eyes. "I can be at a computer for an hour or two, Oliver. I need to. Thea's family. She's my children's family. She's *our* family. And we can save her. If we can find her. And I can. I know I can."

Oliver nods, running his hands up and down her arms. "I know you can."

He smiles, but it does nothing to cover how off he suddenly sounds. His hands drag down her arms until he finds her fingers. He tangles them together, but before he can say anything, Felicity cuts him off.

"She's going to be okay, Oliver." She doesn't miss the quick flash of guilt and fear that crosses his face. Felicity squeezes his fingers. "She will be, because we have the cure and because it's not like she knows how to hide."

"She hid before." His guilt doubles at that, distorting his face with anguish as he bows his head. "I mean she was *hidden* from us. Before. Those entire two weeks when I wasn't looking for her. And now I am, and I should be able to find her, Felicity, but I can't. She's… she's just gone. What if…?"

Felicity shakes her head, pulling on his hands as he interrupts, "You told me she was sort of lucid, right? That she was definitely angry, and strong, but she knew you. She was aware it was you. She wasn't some… mirakuru puppet with invisible strings. Right?"

Oliver winces, the reminder of what happened the week before cutting through him. His voice is choked as he says, "Yeah. But…"

"And that, to me, is only a reminder of how strong-willed your sister is," she continues. He huffs under his breath, shaking his head, but she doesn't let him speak. "Those crazed guys were weak sticks compared to Thea Queen." Oliver meets her gaze. The slight shimmer of hope in his eyes is hard to miss. "She's probably scared right now, Oliver, because she doesn't know what's happening to her. If I can find her trail, we'll find her. Okay? If you've been looking for her and haven't been able to find her just yet, that probably means she's somewhere safe, right? She's *okay*."

He believes her. Maybe he just wants to believe her, she isn't sure, but her words sink in, placating him. Oliver shakes his head in wonder,

the same awe lacing his voice as he whispers, "You're remarkable, Felicity. What would I do without you?"

"Probably crash and burn," Felicity says with a smile that has him chuckling. With a little nod and a breathy, "Yeah," he leans down and captures her lips. The kiss is soft, but it still somehow burns right through her, leaving her breathless and wanting more. But it also makes her feel so incredibly cherished it's amazing. Her breath catches and when he pulls back, she bites her bottom lip, her eyes on his mouth. "Those lips of yours are dangerous."

Oliver's chuckle is louder this time. "Let's find Thea, get her home…" He grins, giving her a salacious wink. "And then I'll show you just how dangerous these lips can be."

Felicity snorts - it's the dorkiest and lamest thing she's ever heard, but it also *works*. The sound quickly dissolves into a giggle as she blushes, knowing exactly what he can do with those lips of his. His grin widens at her response.

"You've got a deal," she replies. They kiss one more time, his lips wrapping around her bottom one in promise, before she looks down at herself. "But first, I should start with a bra and some jeans."

The actual getting downstairs thing turns out to be more of a challenge than Felicity had thought it would be. She makes it down the hall by herself, with Oliver at her back, but by the time she reaches the stairs, the actual thought of going down all of them makes her legs *shake*. It reminds her of the last fire drill at QC she'd been present for - she'd been on the 38th floor fixing someone's computer when the alarms had sounded. She'd had to go down all those flights and she'd been insanely sore the next day, from going *down* the stairs. She hadn't realized going down so many flights turned her quads into actual jello, but it's something she'll remember forever.

Like right now for instance.

Oliver sees right through her hesitation - probably because she's gripping the banister so hard that her knuckles are white - and he doesn't waste a second.

"C'mere," he says before he sweeps her up into his arms. Felicity lets out a startled squeak, grabbing onto him. He adjusts her so she's settled against his chest before he jogs down the stairs. Actually *jogs* with her in his arms. Which is weirdly hot, and now is so not the time to fall down that rabbit hole. "I think stairs are a challenge for another

day," he explains, barely out of breath as they reach the bottom.

"I am inclined to agree with that," Felicity replies, looping her arm around his neck. Once they reach the bottom, Oliver pauses. He doesn't put her down, but he doesn't keep walking either. And Felicity doesn't find herself complaining. No, she's actually quite comfortable. "I mean, if you're okay with taking me the rest of the way to the office…"

Oliver chuckles. "I am very okay with that."

"But it's only because you're very comfortable," Felicity adds. "It has nothing to do with being tired. My boyfriend's arms are very comfortable." She runs her hand down his arm, more than enjoying the play of his bicep under her fingers as he walks with her, making his way to the office. "Very good, comfortable arms. Still, this is a one-time thing. I'll be jogging up and down those stairs before you know it."

"I don't mind," Oliver says softly, holding her closer.

"And that's one of the many reasons why I love you." Felicity pulls herself up to kiss his cheek. "But maybe we should keep the carrying for sexy times only."

One of Oliver's eyebrows goes up at that. "You know what we haven't tried yet?" he asks as they sweep into the office.

Her eyes spot her laptop sitting on the desk, the same one that had been upstairs, the same one that Oliver had practically hidden from her in his effort to make sure she got better. She's only half-listening to his response as she distractedly asks, "Hmm?" while he makes his way around the ridiculously large desk. Felicity's half-leaning out of his arms - she just wants to touch it - when Oliver doesn't set her down. She looks back at him with a frown. "What is it?"

There's a wicked gleam in his eye as leans in to whisper, "I haven't had the chance to throw you over my shoulder yet."

Despite herself, a deep burn ignites in the pit of her stomach.

Some part of her recognizes what he's doing, that he's making light of a situation that is the exact opposite. Once Felicity gets down to business, she knows - *knows* - she'll find Thea. And then it will be facing the reality of not only where she's been, but finding her, getting her the cure, mending the bridges that have been burned so badly

they're nearly gone. He's scared. She knows it and he knows it.

He's deflecting.

Felicity narrows her eyes in chastisement, meaning to diffuse the situation when she says, "You'd have to catch me first," but it does the exact opposite.

His eyes darken, his pupils blowing wide. His lips tick up slightly. "I'd catch you."

The promise in his voice is the same promise from upstairs. He would catch her, and it wouldn't matter how hard she made it for him. The heat in her stomach goes deeper, tugging at her core in a way that they so don't have time for right now. Still, her only response is to bite her bottom lip, to realize her breathing is quickening a little too much, and that his fingers are digging into her, his touch shifting to something a little more carnal.

"Later," Felicity says. Her own promise is evident.

Oliver nods, and the look in his eyes morphs back to something more shuttered as reality settles in again.

He sets her down. Her legs are slightly shaky - alright, they're *a lot* shaky - and she grips the desk to keep herself from collapsing before she falls into the desk chair. Thankfully it's nice and cushy and it takes the brunt of her weight with hardly a groan.

"Alright," Felicity says, lacing her fingers together before stretching her arms out in a move that's meant to crack all of them at once. She instantly regrets it when every single knuckle throbs with short, sharp stabs of pain. "*Ow*. Okay, that's only cool in the movies." Oliver chuckles from beside her, and she looks up just in time to see him shaking his head at her with affection before leaning down to kiss the top of her head. Felicity shrugs with a, "It was a worth a try," before she opens her laptop. It's been asleep and the second the login screen pops up, she lets out a long, cleansing breath. "Oh, momma's missed you."

"I missed you, too!"

Felicity jumps at the sudden voice coming from the doorway. Before she can so much as react, Ellie's running into the office.

"I cleared the path, Momma, so you got here nice and safe," she

announces, sidling up next to Felicity.

"Yes, you did," Felicity replies, leaning over to hug her daughter. "Thank you for that."

Ellie gives her a definitive nod, gripping the edge of the unusually high desk, pushing up onto her toes to see the screen. With a few keystrokes, Felicity has several programs coming up, her brain already jumping twenty paces ahead to all the things she'll need to get the searches started. Not only on Thea, but Slade, and catching up on what happened with Queen Consolidated.

"Can I help?" Ellie asks.

That makes Felicity pause - because really, the answer is sort of no - but Oliver swoops in, stepping around the chair and picking Ellie up.

"I need your help, Ellie-bug," Oliver says, dropping one hand to rub Felicity's back before stepping away. He gives Felicity a wink. "We'll leave you two alone."

His choice of words has Felicity scrunching her nose at him, but that's it, because her fingers are already flying across the keyboard. They know exactly what to do, following the long list of instructions her brain has already sent out. Several pop-ups appear on her screen, jockeying for attention as she types out code that she long ago memorized as she starts several dozen different tasks at once. She just needs one hint, one little thing that she can follow.

She can find Thea this time. She knows she can.

Felicity wonders if part of her is in some slight denial considering what happened the last time Thea went missing. No, there's no Isabel this time, no leverage to be held over anyone. The damage has already been done. Felicity is one hundred percent confident that far more can be done with Thea out there on her own, a dangerous poison amplifying her every emotion and making her wicked strong, than when she she was kidnapped and held somewhere.

"Help with what, Daddy?" Ellie asks.

Oliver doesn't get the chance to respond.

A dark shadow fills the doorway, somehow occupying the entire space despite being so much thinner than the last time she'd seen him. It's Roy, a very angry, very on-edge Roy. He's more gaunt, his clothes

hanging on his frame unevenly. Not eating when times are hard is a ridiculously unhealthy trait he and Oliver share, apparently. It's only when he steps further into the sunlight coming through the windows that Felicity's jaw drops. He's better, at least as much as he can be considering. The cure might have worked, but it did absolutely nothing for the anger simmering under the surface. It's a palpable presence around him and Felicity now completely understands why he hasn't come to visit. The mirakuru might be out of his system, but something's still off in him. And based on the tidbits she's heard from everyone, it's only gotten worse the longer Thea's been missing.

Felicity feels Oliver tensing beside her, his hand dropping to her shoulder as Ellie falls silent in his arms.

That breaks Felicity's heart - first Thea, now Roy. She realizes that Oliver never told her about what happened when Roy discovered her existence, or what Ellie did when he finally woke up. She thinks she doesn't want to know.

"Roy," Felicity says. But that's all she has. Until she sees he's still wearing his customary red hoodie, but in place of the jeans she remembers him having, he's wearing a pair of soft flannel pajama bottoms. "You look… comfy."

The young man clenches his jaw. "They're Oliver's," he bites out.

"That's… they're nice," Felicity manages. She shakes her head - what is she doing? - and points to her screen. "I'm just…"

Roy ignores her, stepping further into the office with a sharp, "Have you found her yet?"

Felicity doesn't miss the way Oliver's grip on her shoulder tightens. She remembers what she overheard a few days before, when Diggle and Oliver had been talking. She sees the evidence now, knows what they'd been saying might have been a slight understatement. Roy is *pissed* - he's scared and angry and worried and it's obvious he's blaming himself just as much as Oliver does. Thea is his soft spot, just as much as she is for Oliver, and instead of finding equal ground based on that, they're butting heads.

Which is pretty typical considering how things had been when Oliver had brought him into the fold.

"I just got started," Felicity says. She looks back at the screen, taking in all the information being thrown at her. There wasn't much to go

on - really, there wasn't anything to go on. But that was before she got behind the wheel. Felicity zeroes in on the safe house, on finding her trail there. "I just need a few minutes and…"

"You've *had* a few minutes," Roy snaps. The acid in his words hits Felicity square in the chest, because he's right. She's had more than a few minutes, and she hasn't been doing anything. "You've been awake for days already, and Thea's still missing."

"*Hey*," Oliver interrupts, his voice rising. Felicity moves to grab him when he lets her go, but he's too fast, already stepping around the desk to put himself between her and Roy. Ellie digs her face into Oliver's neck, trying to make herself as small as possible as he holds her tightly. "She's still healing. She's doing the best she can. Let her work."

"She could have been working if you hadn't kept her holed up in your room for the last *two days*," Roy retorts. "We could have found Thea, we could have found something, but you were more interested in playing house with your new family." His accusing eyes find Felicity. "Both of you."

Felicity wants to say something, to say anything, but he's not wrong. What had they been doing just a moment ago, when it'd just been them? Teasing each other, making each other laugh, being perfectly content to pretend like nothing was wrong…

The guilt that fills her has her stomach twisting.

"Hey, back off," Oliver growls. The sound has Ellie flinching, making her father soften, but it doesn't last long when Roy steps forward. Oliver instantly moves to intercept him, putting his hand up. "I said let her work. She needed to get better so she could help, Roy. I want to find Thea just as much as you do."

"Yeah, right," Roy scoffs. "If that were true you would've had Felicity on this already."

"Damn it, Roy," Oliver says, his voice dropping several octaves as he steps closer to the other man, turning his body to shield Ellie from his wrath and from Roy as his other hand makes a tight fist. The sight of Roy stepping up to meet him has her stomach slamming into the floor. She's already pushing herself up, ready to intervene, to do something - if anything, for Ellie's sake - as Oliver continues, "You don't *know*…"

One of the windows on her screen suddenly flashing stops her.

"Hey!" Felicity's voice is loud, sharp and decisive, and it cuts through the air so effectively that both men instantly freeze, turning back to her. Her eyes are already on the screen as she leans over, her fingers moving over the keys. "You wanna talk about not having time for something, let's talk about…"

What she sees has her voice fading.

She can feel the color leaching from her face, feel her heart stopping, feel the residual blood in her head rushing through her ears as the sight on her screen tries to register.

"What?" Oliver asks. The urgency in his voice matches his long strides as he and Roy rush to Felicity's side. "What is it?"

"Oh no," is all Felicity manages, followed quickly by a string of curses from Roy and deadly silence from Oliver.

Her searches worked, really, really well. But not for Thea, no. She didn't have time to set them up properly, to find the trail, to track her down.

But for Slade… for Slade she already had the algorithms in the system, already had them set up from several weeks ago when he'd been the biggest threat in their lives, the biggest threat to Ellie.

She didn't need time to find him. And, ultimately, the search for Thea would be redundant. Because they've already found her entirely on accident.

Because she's with Slade.

"Where…?" Oliver manages, his voice cracking with an unbridled mixture of fear and rage.

Felicity's already moving. Her legs nearly give out in a burst of exhaustion and she narrowly finds the chair, but she ignores it. She ignores Oliver grabbing her shoulder, ignores Roy picking something up behind them and throwing it against the wall. The only thing she reacts to is Ellie's frightened whimper at the sudden change in the room, at the loud sound of whatever Roy just broke… but even then…

"It's an abandoned hangar," Felicity replies. "At that tiny little airport right outside the Glades."

That's all Roy needs to hear. He's up and moving before any of them

can blink. Oliver moves to go after him, roaring his name, but he stops himself, turning back to her.

"*Felicity*…"

"Hang on," she says, the words coming out harsher than she intended, but she already knows what he's asking. It takes her far too long to hack into the system, the archaic system moving annoyingly slow, but she finally does. And when she sees the manifest for the next plane scheduled to leave there, she stops breathing.

Felicity looks up at Oliver.

"He's taking her out of the country."

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Please note the added tags as of this chapter!

Also, we are going to do our very best to continue to post every Monday morning regardless, but both of us are going to be at HVFF San Jose later this month and there's a chance we might not have a chapter ready for that Monday (August 29th). We'll let you know how it's looking next week. Much love to all you guys! Your support is amazing and we are SO grateful!

"*He's taking her out of the country.*"

The words hang between them. The air thickens, the atmosphere in the office shifting on a dime as the reality of what she's saying settles heavily in Oliver's chest.

No.

He's sure he says it out loud, a hopeless cry that rips through him, but nobody reacts.

The only thing keeping him going over the last several days, besides Felicity and Ellie, has been the bone-deep certainty that he's going to find Thea. Because he has to. Because their last words to each other can't be her hateful accusations and his desperate pleas. Because he can't fail his sister. For more than a week, all he'd done when he wasn't pretending to sleep at Felicity's bedside was search for her. He's reached out to every contact he has, both as Oliver Queen and as The Arrow. He's begged for ARGUS' help, had Sara contact the League, made an unsettling call to Anatoly. All of it to no avail. He just wants to find her, to bring her home. All he's wanted since this began is to see her again, to know she's more-or-less whole and relatively unharmed.

But, now that he has seen her, he knows it wasn't enough.

This is so, *so* much worse.

Nothing recognizable lives in the features of the girl on the screen in front of him. She's all hard edges and coiled rage. Even through the fuzzy black and white feed he can see her shaking, like her body is

falling apart under the emotional and mental onslaught. But she's somehow guarded as ever, her lip curling in a toothy sneer as she looks around her, seeking an outlet for the anger that lives in her veins now.

A wave of nausea nearly chokes him.

She looks more like Isabel Rochev right now than she does his little sister.

But that's nothing compared to the sight of Slade's heavy hand on her shoulder, guiding her, directing her, all with her tacit acceptance. The duo exchanges words. He can't hear them - while the airport hangar might have video, it doesn't have audio - and it's too indistinct to read their lips. But whatever Thea bites out - she says it with enough venom that Oliver can *see* it on the screen - Slade simply smiles in reply. It's a broad, toothy grin that sends shivers straight down Oliver's spine.

Anything that makes Slade happy isn't good.

His eyes never leaving the screen, Oliver drops his hand to Felicity's shoulder. He grips her tightly, probably too tightly, but he can't help it.

"Felicity…" he chokes out, his voice wet and raw.

"He's a bad man," Ellie replies before Felicity can even open her mouth. She's curled in on herself slightly, her eyes glued on the screen, her lips twisted in a scowl. Felicity makes a move to cover the screen, but Oliver's already shifting their daughter to his other side, partially blocking her view with his body. But Ellie just shakes her head, turning to Oliver. "I don't like him. And I don't think Aunt Thea knows he's a bad man. You gotta go get Aunt Thea, Daddy." She pats his cheek. "I'll stay here and take care of Momma. I'll make sure she doesn't sleep again."

Oliver hadn't even stopped to think about Ellie seeing that surveillance, or what it would mean to her. But even after her own horrifying history with Slade, after the last time she'd seen Thea, after seeing so fully what mirakuru can do to someone… that the only thing she says is that she'll protect her mother while he saves her aunt is astounding, absolutely incredible. She's stronger than him, he's sure of it. She's stronger than all of them. The ease with which she shoulders the mantle of protector takes his breath away.

Looking into her earnest blue eyes and her quiet resolve, Oliver can't help but think that whatever he does to save the city, to honor his father's memory, Robert Queen's granddaughter will do more. Her future is still unwritten, all of life's possibilities at her feet, but she will make a difference with her life. Part of him has known that since the moment he met Ellie, but there's a certainty now that lives beneath his skin. She is all the best parts of her mother, all the best parts of him, with none of the morally bankrupt history that he's left in his wake.

He won't say it now. Besides the fact that she's a mere toddler, the weight of that expectation is enough to crush anyone. But something tells him that Ellie would still bear it with an optimistic smile, and a drive to better herself. Because that's the kind of person his little girl is - *him*, but better, so much better.

Oliver brushes his lips across her brow. "How about you two take care of each other," he suggests before setting her down.

Felicity minimizes the video feed quickly just before she spins the chair towards them. "That sounds perfect to me," she says, reaching for Ellie as the little girl moves to climb into her lap.

"'Cause that's what families do," Ellie says, settling in her mother's arms. "Right, Momma?"

"That's right." Felicity pulls Ellie closer. "Just like Daddy will take care of Aunt Thea." Her voice is calm and sure, and it's only solidified when she casts her gaze up at Oliver. The look she gives him is backed up by their whispered conversations as Ellie slept, of his fear for Thea, his worry and concern, of them trying to prepare themselves for the reality that they might not get her back. But there's also what happened at Queen Consolidated and the memory of Slade terrorizing them when Ellie had first come into their lives.

Her eyes are full of steel, a silent but firm command shining back at him: *Bring her home*.

As if he needed to be told.

Squaring his jaw, his eyes grim and his brow tight, he gives her a quick nod before turning to go.

Felicity doesn't let him get far, not yet. She grabs his arm, her voice cutting through the tension-filled room with a sharp, "Oliver."

Oliver meets her gaze again. The intensity of her stare, the heat of it,

hasn't diminished in the least.

"He was your friend once." She takes her hand back, pressing her fingers through Ellie's hair. As if a power greater than her is directing her, Felicity turns her face downward for an instant to look at their daughter. Ellie's cuddled up, humming contentedly as she leans into her mother's chest. Felicity looks back up with heavy meaning as her eyes lock with his. "He's not anymore."

There's zero doubt in his mind what she means. Slade is done. The time for mercy is past and there can be no more second chances. There can be no peace with him alive any more than there could have been with Malcolm Merlyn.

"I know," he replies. His understanding resonates in his tone and Felicity gives him a quick nod. She keeps her eyes on him as she kisses the top of Ellie's head, wrapping her arms around their daughter protectively. She curls herself around the little girl, and it's clear she's protecting both of their children right now. Oliver's moving towards them before he can even think, the need to touch her - to reassure her just as much as him - taking over. He smoothes his hand over her hair, leaning down to press a lingering kiss against her forehead. She lets out a tremulous sigh, leaning into him as he wraps his arms around both of them. "We'll be back," he says, his lips moving against her, the meaning of the word 'we' filling the room. She nods and Oliver leans down to kiss Ellie quickly. He whispers, "I love you," before turning to leave.

"We love you," Felicity replies, her voice just as soft.

"Momma," Ellie says, sitting up. Oliver glances back to see her looking at the computer screen. She tugs on Felicity's sleeve as she asks. "Where'd Aunt Thea and the bad man go?"

Felicity's smile is forced as she spins back to the computer. She grabs her tablet, saying, "How about you watch Rascal on my tablet while I help Daddy out?"

"But I wanna see Aunt Thea," Ellie argues, a slight trace of stubbornness leaking through.

"And you will," Felicity replies with a confidence that fills the cracks of doubt inside Oliver. She grabs her earpiece, firing up the tablet. "When she's back home. Until then, you should see what Rascal's up to."

"But…"

Oliver doesn't stick around to hear more. It will be a battle, he's sure, but one that Felicity will ultimately win. Right now… right now he needs to focus on getting his sister back, on rounding up the team. There's more to his family than just Felicity, Ellie and the unborn baby. They're the core of it, the foundation that forms his sense of home, but it extends beyond them, too. And as much as he wants to, as much as he feels the pull of comfort and safety and sanity, he can't afford to linger with them. Not when there are battles to be fought and wars to be won for the sake of their larger family.

For Thea.

For Roy.

For his mother.

Oliver would be the first to admit that he has a tendency to let go, that he'd been letting himself drift before Ellie showed up. It was easier to be mad at his mother about the Undertaking, to lie to Thea about her parentage, to keep Felicity at arm's length when he's known for so long that there was more there, to turn to Sara, something familiar, instead of facing the challenge of the unknown.

His fealty extends to them, just as much as Felicity and Ellie. It always has. If anything, Ellie has only taught him that the intensity of those connections, the importance of them, make him more human, make him better than he is without them. And there's no question that his sister is a prime example of that - she has *always* meant the world to him, brought out the best in him, even when he was at his worst. Especially when he was at his worst.

She deserves the best of him now.

The first thing he sees as he strides out into the foyer is the familiar flash of red.

"*Roy*," he barks.

The younger man stops dead in his tracks, his hand on the front doorknob. The cure might have worked on him, but the rage that saturates his muscles is as present as ever. He has more control, but it's not like before. Cisco hasn't been able to assure them that it ever will be. There's still something *else* under the surface, and it's making its presence known right now. It's only a reminder of how little they

know about mirakuru and the cure.

"Five minutes," Oliver says, his voice stringent.

He watches the boy's scowl deepen and the muscles in his jaw twitch.

It's not a request and Roy knows better than to view it as one.

"She is out there," Roy says through gritted teeth, his voice all sharp edges. He points toward the door, his voice rising as he continues. "She's out there *right now* and we finally know where she is and you want me to wait?"

"I want you to use your head," Oliver snaps back just as loud. He closes the space between him and Roy. "We aren't going to get her back by charging in head first without a plan."

"This is *Thea!*" Roy shouts.

"I know that!" Oliver yells back, matching his volume easily. "She's my *sister*, and whatever she is to you, whatever she might someday be, she's my family *now*." His voice echoes through the anteroom, somehow getting louder with each passing second of silence. "I loved her first, Roy, so back the hell off, take a breath and let us come up with a plan that doesn't end with all of us dead, because I *promise* you that we will not take Slade Wilson by surprise."

A low-voiced curse and a quick inhale come from behind him. Oliver and Roy turn as one to find they aren't alone anymore. Oliver has no idea when they showed up, obviously drawn by the raised voices, but his mother, Digg, Cisco, Sara and Lyla are all there. Diggle shakes his head as Sara squares her jaw; Oliver knows they both appreciate the gravity of what he just said. They've both been on the team long enough, have battled Slade enough, to connect the dots and to reach the same conclusion he has.

His mother, however, is another story.

"You found her?" Moira asks, stepping forward and placing a hand on his arm. "And he has her? *Again*?"

He doesn't want to answer her. It hurts him to even think the words running through his mind, but they can't go unsaid. His mother can't possibly understand the gravity of the situation, what they'll face when they get to Thea, what they'll face if they can manage to bring her home. This is so much worse than her being held captive.

"She's not with him against her will," Oliver says.

Moira physically recoils. She snatches her hand back, disbelief and denial shadowing her face. She shakes her head minutely, just enough to show the quick flash of pain and horror in her eyes before she shuts down. Her face closes off, her features hardening with a long-practiced callousness that always falls into place when she withdraws emotionally. For all her flaws, his mother's weakness for him and his sister has always been consistent.

Oliver can only watch her. He wants to say more, wants to console her and tell her everything will be alright, but he honestly doesn't know if that's true. She meets his gaze, and he can see the challenge in her eyes - '*Tell me this isn't true.*'

The pain in his chest nearly chokes him.

"They're using each other," Sara says. Oliver's eyes dart to hers; her gaze is piercing, seeing straight through his simple words. "He's going to turn her into a weapon, isn't he? To use against you, Ollie."

"No," Moira interjects. Her voice is jagged and raw, but her face is prideful and unwavering. It doesn't change the truth of Sara's words, though. No amount of willpower can do that. "No," his mother repeats, shaking her head. "This is *Thea*."

"Exactly," Digg says, exchanging a look with Lyla who nods in agreement. "Slade wants to make Oliver suffer by hitting him where it hurts the most. He can't get at Ellie. He's got to know she's outside his grasp at this point. Felicity, too. But Thea's powerful, scared, angry and easily accessible."

"And Slade is nothing if not opportunistic," Sara notes. "He'd love this. He probably thinks it's justice."

Oliver's mind flashes back to the rooftop of Queen Consolidated just moments before it had collapsed beneath their feet.

"*Maybe I'll spare your daughter*," Slade had mused. "*She's young. Malleable. Just imagine the things I could teach her*."

God, he'd told them his plan, he'd *told* them. He's had to adapt, reimagine his revenge to fit with the limitations they've imposed on him, but this is still what he's doing. Oliver's certain of it. Only he hadn't managed to get ahold of Ellie, so he's using Thea instead.

"Not for long," Oliver grinds out, his voice so tight it feels like speaking might strain his vocal chords. "We're going to end this for good."

"I should have killed that bastard when I had the chance," Moira utters, her voice dripping with venom and absolutely hatred. The darkness on her face almost gives him chills. "He can't be allowed to survive this, Oliver."

Oliver remembers very well their last conversation about Slade in this house. He'd argued for mercy, to give Slade a chance to redeem himself while Moira had argued against clemency. No longer.

"He won't," Oliver vows. "I promise."

Dark satisfaction floods her features.

"Wow." Everyone turns to Cisco, whose eyes dart back and forth between Oliver and Moira almost comically. "You all are awfully trigger happy."

"Bows don't have triggers," Oliver replies with enough bite to make Cisco wince.

"Okay, hey, we're good here. We're cool," Cisco says, putting his hands up. "Although that was *so* not my point."

Irritation creeps up the back of Oliver's neck, a wave of heat prickling along his skin. He makes tight fists, narrowing his eyes at Cisco, forcing himself to not take his head off. He doesn't care how helpful he's been, he doesn't get to come into his house, into his team, and dictate how they save their loved ones.

Cisco opens his mouth to keep talking, but when he meets Oliver's eyes, when he feels the wave of animosity coming at him, he takes a step back and shakes his head instead. Oliver wants to feel bad for the mixture of fear and uncertainty on his face, but he doesn't.

"We don't have time for this," Roy says, his voice edged with the same irritation Oliver's feeling. When Oliver glances over at him, he's glowering at Cisco before turning his eyes to Oliver. "We need to go *now*."

He's right. But they need to do it with a purpose, with a *plan*, because it's certain that Slade has one. Oliver has no doubt that he has contingencies in place in case they show up. Slade's every move is

calculated to his advantage. They need to do the same or they *will* lose.

"I know," Oliver says. He turns to the group. "Sara, I want you and Lyla here with Felicity and Ellie. Digg, suit up."

"Ollie, I'm not sitting this one out," Sara says, stepping closer. "I know Slade just as well as you do. If this is how we get Thea back, you need all the help you can get."

"But I also need all the help I can get here," Oliver counters. "Slade isn't the only one we have to worry about." He closes his eyes at his own reminder, at the memory of his heart stopping every time one of the detectors goes off, alerting them to a breach. "Zoom-"

"Has been trying and has been failing," Sara replies. "The tachyon detectors *work*. And with or without a herd of masks here, there are still plans in place, plans you created yourself." She levels him with a look full of meaning, a look speaking to their months on the island together, to the several years between them of tactical training and awareness. "Slade already has the upperhand because of Thea. Don't give him more ground."

The thought of leaving Felicity and Ellie here, with just his mother and Lyla… his gut says no, protect them at all costs, because he's not here to do it himself. But the logic in Sara's words is nearly impossible to ignore. He has to get Thea back, and he's willing to do almost anything to make that happen.

"Ollie."

With a short nod, Oliver says, "You're right. I need you with us."

Sara smiles. She grasps his forearm, saying softly, "We're gonna get her back."

For some reason, hearing someone else say it makes it seem more impossible.

Sara sees the wavering in his eyes and understanding reflects back at him in hers. Without another word, she turns to Diggle and says, "Let's go suit up."

Diggle gives his own nod, moving to follow Sara up the stairs. He pauses long enough to press his hand to Lyla's stomach and kiss her on the forehead, whispering a gentle, "Be careful."

"You, too, Johnny," she replies in a calm, reassuring voice. It's only a reminder that while Sara may have League training, Lyla is no wallflower. Her powerful, reliable presence calms Oliver more than he could have thought possible. The fact that she doesn't watch Digg go up the stairs, that she's confident enough that she is going to see him, that everything will be okay, reassures him more than anything else could. Turning to Oliver, she asks, "They in the office?"

He responds with a nod, and he hopes she can see his gratitude. He thinks she does because she gives him a small smile and a nod of her own before she's off towards the office, where he can vaguely hear Ellie's happy chattering.

It wasn't too long ago that her desire to help them here was at war with her job at ARGUS. But ever since what happened with Slade and Queen Consolidated, her role at the covert organization has been greatly diminished. Waller hadn't taken well to the losses at QC, including a powerful resource like Slade, and demoted her former second-in-command to little more than a data entry specialist. It will hurt them, in some ways, to lose those eyes and ears inside ARGUS, but it also frees her up to be a more active part of the team. He's sure that will help them more than anything going forward. Lyla's an incredible asset and Oliver can't help but question Waller's judgement for having pushed her aside out of petty spite.

A bright, "Aunt Lyla!" echoes down the hallway just before the office door shuts.

Oliver tunes it out. He has to. This isn't the time for distractions and if his mind stays behind in that room along with his heart then his sister is as good as dead. And so is he.

"Oliver."

His eyes find his mother's again. The dangerous flint from earlier hasn't diminished in the least. She's fierce, Moira Queen, she always has been. But her ruthlessness has grown by leaps and bounds over the past few months. Maybe it's just that he's seeing more, or maybe he's less blinded by his own assumptions about her. The Undertaking had stripped away so much of how he'd seen both his parents.

"You will bring my baby back," Moira says, her voice unwavering. "And you will put that man in the ground. Or I will."

Cisco takes a not-so-subtle step away from her. Oliver doesn't get the chance to respond, not that he needs to. They're already on the same

page, and he doesn't need to waste time even thinking about how she could possibly succeed if he failed. Because he won't fail. It isn't even an option.

"Oliver," Roy bites out. "We-"

"Roy," Oliver snaps, his head whipping back to him. "If we just went charging in there without a plan-"

"Are you gonna grab your bow or what?" Roy interrupts. Oliver grits his teeth, forcing himself to take a deep breath to calm himself, but Roy isn't done. "Or do we need to plan that, too?"

That pushes him over the edge.

Oliver spins, stepping up until he's toe-to-toe with Roy. The younger man doesn't back off in the least, squaring his shoulders, setting his jaw, but Oliver still catches the startlement and the urge to flinch that crosses his features. He doesn't, though. Oliver feels a weird sense of pride for that fact alone. Still, he's seriously straining the limits of Oliver's patience and while he's willing to give Roy a little leeway considering everything that he's been through, there's only so much Oliver's willing to take.

The air around them is charged. Roy's ready for battle, practically itching for a fight - for *any* fight - and it's one hundred percent borne of fear and a lack of control. Roy's *terrified*. He's spent the last who knows how long used as a medical experiment to turn others into a weapon and to corrupt his own girlfriend. He's lost control over his body, his mind, his emotions, and his actions.

But it's not a battle Roy needs right now, as much as he might think so. It's direction, support, and if anyone knows what it's like to be used as a tool of violence for someone else's agenda, it's Oliver.

He grabs the back of Roy's neck with a firm grip and leans down, tilting his forehead toward the other man and lowering his voice enough that neither his mother nor Cisco can easily tell what he's saying. These words aren't for them.

"We will get her back," Oliver vows, feeling every single word down to his bones. "We will make this right and you're both going to get better and put this behind you." His grip on Roy's neck tightens with emphasis. "I swear to you. I failed you both once. I won't do it again. But I need you to trust me."

Whatever Roy had been expecting him to say, it's clear that wasn't it. But he doesn't move. The other man's so still it's almost like he isn't breathing. When he still doesn't respond, Oliver shakes him slightly, feeling the irrational urge to *make* him hear his words, to force the truth of them to sink in.

"Trust me," Oliver says. "Please."

Oliver sees it the instant he reaches him. Some of the fight drains right out of him, his shoulders sagging, the muscles of his neck releasing under Oliver's hand. Roy's face softens, his brow furrowing, looking so incredibly young all of a sudden it's jarring. He comes across as both broken and lost, like his anger had been the only thing keeping him together. Now that the mirakuru is out of his system, it's left a void, one he's struggling to fill again. Or maybe it seeped into cracks that were already there, filling them with a rage that leaves nothing but broken pieces in its stead.

It makes Oliver wonder what Thea will be like when they cure her.

Mirakuru leaves scars.

The only response Roy offers is a barely imperceptible nod. Had Oliver's hand not been on the back of his neck, he might not have even detected the gesture. But he does. Oliver grips his neck more firmly - in solidarity - before letting go and stepping back.

He meets his mother's eyes, the dark promise still shining back at him, and then Cisco's, which are uneasy at best. Oliver's turning back to Roy, to tell him to go find something better than those damn plaid pants he has on, when Cisco interrupts him.

"So…"

"What?" Oliver asks, cutting through the crap.

Cisco steps forward, wincing when they all stare at him with an expectation that's weighty as hell. But he doesn't back down.

"There is something you need to know before you leave."

The late-morning air is a tangible wall of humidity, and it only gets worse the further from the city they get.

By the time they reach the small hangar in the middle of a swamp-like area outside of Starling City, it's damn near unbearable. Overnight

rains have given way to a sweltering heat that leaves beads of sweat trickling across Oliver's skin. The leather of his suit sticks awkwardly, restricting his movements more than he'd like. It has him gritting his teeth, his every motion only amping up his fear-fueled aggravation.

It'd taken too long to get here and, by the time they were finally on their way, he and Roy were finding even ground with the urge to just *move*. Now that they finally are, his skin is too tight; it's dry and itchy, which only makes the feel of his hood and mask way past irritating.

Roy isn't faring much better, swiping at the back of his neck with furious motions, like he can scare the moisture away. Sara manages better, in small part because her mask is so minimal, but mostly because discomfort became a fact of life for her years ago. Diggle is doing better than all of them, sweating, but moving much easier. There's something to be said for the benefits of street clothes.

Oliver is painfully aware of what he's doing - he's distracting himself. Rather, letting himself be distracted. He's fought in hundreds of battles throughout his life so far, but few have been this personal

"No patrols," Felicity says over the comm. "Which is freaky good luck. Do they really have no backup? Are they just Bonnie and Clyde-ing this?"

The analogy makes Oliver cringe and it does absolutely nothing to calm him down. Felicity's voice is usually enough, but the imagery of her words is unsettling. That is somewhere his brain is just not willing to go. Oliver doesn't miss the disgust that plays across Roy's face, as well.

"I have a friend named Bonnie at school!" Ellie's voice chirps in the background. The sound of his daughter is the soothing balm he needs, letting him close his eyes for a split second and take a deep breath as she babbles on, "She's not my *best* friend, though. That's Little Sara. I miss Little Sara. Can I play with her soon?"

He hears Lyla responding, but it's too quiet for Oliver to make out her words. Which is fine, since there's a great deal more that needs his attention right now than his daughter's playdate schedule. That will be for later.

Oliver nods at Digg and Sara, who split off towards the side entrance. A quick look at Roy has the younger man scaling up the side of the building to perch atop the aluminum roof. For his part, Oliver creeps along the front until he's flush against the wall next to the open

hangar door.

The camera in the corner is unsettling, as it's pointed right at him, but the light on it is off and he knows Felicity well enough that she doesn't even have to assure him that she's taken care of it. That's not true for all of them, though.

"So," Sara whispers over the comm, "these cameras are on a loop or something, right?"

"Oh ye of little faith," Felicity scoffs, her fingers punching away at keys in the background. "I hijacked that system while you all were still en route."

"I helped!" Ellie shouts. That gives Oliver a moment of pause as he simultaneously wonders what exactly his three-year-old did and what the hell Felicity is doing letting her help with stuff like this.

"Yes, you did," Felicity replies. Oliver can hear her smile as she speaks to Ellie, lowering her voice like she doesn't want to distract them. Not that it makes much of a difference. "You hit that enter button like a pro, Ellie-bug. How about you draw a picture of Rascal playing with the fairies for Daddy? I bet he'd like that."

Oliver doesn't catch Ellie's reply, but he does hear a sigh of relief from Felicity a moment later.

"We good?" he asks quietly.

"Yup," Felicity says. "Five by five."

"Five by five?" He furrows his brow. "What the hell does that mean?"

Sara's soft snort comes through loud and clear over the comm. "Your pop culture knowledge is embarrassing, Ollie. Laurel, Thea and I all failed you."

Just hearing his sister's name has a pang of grief-laced mourning lancing through his heart. Not just the sound of it, really, but the reference to better times. Simpler times, long before the Gambit. It resonates deep within his being, leaving him equal parts solemn and bereft, because everything is so fractured now because of *him*. Things haven't been right between them, not since he lied to her, kept secrets. Everything else going on always seemed so much more pressing than repairing his relationship with his sister.

He'd always assumed there'd be more time to fix it all.

Now he wonders if he still has that opportunity. He's been so focused on the big picture that he's lost sight of the everyday moments, the ones that make the most difference, that create the foundation for everything else. Some part of him hates that it took his toddler traveling from the future to realize that, while the rest of him is so grateful that it *did* happen.

Fighting to save his sister, fighting for their relationship, that isn't a one-time thing that fixes everything. It's the small things, the little moments, the ones that need to happen *now*. That's what will mend the cracks in their bond.

After a long moment of silence that hangs in the air, Felicity says softly, "Guess there's a Netflix binge for you and Thea in the near future."

"Yeah," Oliver replies, equally quiet. The idea lets a ray of hope and longing seep into his veins. His lips quirk slightly, because he actually *believes* it. They're going to save Thea, and they're going to watch whatever 'five by five' comes from. Together. "Yeah, I guess there is."

"And there are parts that are kind of freakishly relevant," Felicity adds, more to herself than anything.

Oliver has no idea what he's going to watch with her, but it doesn't matter. That's not the point. The point is *Thea*, and stealing her drink, and mixing peanut M&Ms in with the popcorn to gross her out, and tugging on her hair when she takes whatever show it is far too seriously.

That's the point.

And that's what he's fighting for right now.

Oliver closes his eyes briefly and lets that center him.

"Alright," he says. "Let's stick to the plan." He glances up at the roof to see Roy nod down at him.

With that as their cue, everyone moves.

Oliver slips inside the hangar. It's cooler, but no less stuffy. Dust and disuse fill the air, almost making him choke. He sticks to the walls, stays in the shadows. The huge open space is lit up by a series of thin

windows across the top of the walls, all the sunlight filling the very center. There are two small airplanes, both of them tucked away, obviously out of use at the moment, in spite of the flight manifest Felicity had found. A cart sits in one corner, several boxes and crates in another. The shadows from the oblong light make it look fuller, but it's not. It's wide open.

And empty.

Oliver's voice is just audible enough as he murmurs, "Eyes on?" into his comm.

A chorus of negative responses come back at him, including Felicity.

He ignores the sliver of doubt and worry that sneaks into his chest. Instead, he pats the small pack strapped to the side of his belt. If what Cisco told him is true, he needs to be ready to get close, very close. And that means drawing Slade and Thea out into that open space, a task that won't exactly be easy. If one of them could find them first.

Keeping his back to the wall, his head on a swivel, he makes his way in even further. He stays in the shadows, melting into them, one hand pressed to the concrete, the other gripping his bow…

"I can hear you breathing, kid."

Fear slices up the length of Oliver's spine.

The voice booms through the space, seeming to come from everywhere all at once. It bounces off the concrete walls and aluminum roof with a resounding dominance, a dominance Oliver feels in his bones. For all his skills and all his devotion, he has so much to lose now, and Slade threatens every last bit of it.

"And your sidekick on the roof," Slade adds, followed by a step.

Oliver spins towards it, pushing off the wall. His bow's already up, aimed at where his voice comes from. Slade steps into the dull sunlight filling the center of the room. His grin grows wider as Oliver meets him there, a garish cut across the man's face. He's facing him, as if he can *see* him, but the two gaping holes where his eyes used to be tell another story.

"I knew you couldn't resist coming after your precious baby sister," Slade says.

A vicious snarl comes from Oliver's left and he steps back quickly, on instinct, his body moving to keep both threats in his line of sight. Thea doesn't stay in one spot though. Almost like they orchestrated the entire thing from the beginning, Thea makes her way towards Slade, her eyes never leaving Oliver. She's practically brimming with rage, twitching. Her eyes are wild, her hair matted, her clothes dirty. She's nothing like his little sister right now and it breaks his heart.

Slade meets her halfway, a sickening look of pride on his face as he grips her shoulder tightly.

When he looks back to Oliver, his lips pull back in a snide sneer as he finishes with, "Even if she has no need to be saved."

"I will always come for Thea," Oliver replies.

"You shouldn't have bothered," Thea snaps through gritted teeth. She lunges for him, driven by a violent instinct that Oliver never wanted her to understand, much less experience. Slade holds her back, his grip on her shoulder tightening. He chuckles darkly, the sound echoing through the warehouse as he reins her in, like a dog on a leash.

Oliver's blood positively boils at the sight. But he keeps himself in check. He makes a show of it by slowly releasing his bow, letting it down as he meets Thea's gaze.

There is one arena he has the advantage in here - unlike Thea and Slade, he has control over his rage. And that's an edge he's absolutely going to take advantage of.

"I will always come for you, Thea," Oliver repeats. For a split second, he thinks he sees something. A spark. Recognition? Understanding? Whatever it is, it's all Oliver needs, as he takes a step towards them with a heavy, "*Always*."

As problematic as their relationship has sometimes been, the bond between them has never once frayed. Not even now. Somewhere deep inside him, he finds himself hoping that Nate loves Ellie even half as much as he loves Thea.

"*No*." Thea shakes her head in harsh, jerky movements. "Only when it's convenient for you," she says. It's violent, *primal*; he sees the spittle flying from her lips from across the length of the hangar.

Slade's laughter in reply is chilling as Oliver fights against letting her

words sink in. He'd let them do that before, let them find root in his being and pollute his purpose, but not now. Thea needs him whole, even if she doesn't know it right now.

"Digg and Sara are at Slade's three and nine," Felicity advises. "Or… is that right? Since you're at his twelve…" She makes a tiny sound. "Whatever. They're at his left and right."

Slade cocks his head, like he can hear her. And then he smiles.

"I know now that I relied too much on my limited field of vision," Slade says. "I don't need to see that you've lowered your bow, kid, or that your precious Felicity there has told you about your *friends*. Not that I needed her to confirm anything." Oliver's stomach clenches. He can hear her? Slade suddenly looks to his right. "Isn't that right, Sara?"

Sara doesn't respond, although the silence is confirmation enough.

With an amused chuckle, Slade turns back to Oliver. "The world is open to me once again. Like it was when I was reborn on that island with the mirakuru in my veins. Like it is for your little sister now."

"You weren't reborn there. You died on that island, Slade," Oliver says. "What's left now is nothing but the shell of a man I once called a friend."

"And what, pray tell," Slade counters, anger mounting in his voice, "does that say of your precious little sister?"

Slade's fingers dig into Thea's shoulder. Anyone else would be crying out in pain, anyone else might have a broken shoulder, but Thea's just as overwhelmed by the mirakuru. All she does is hiss and glare daggers in her brother's direction.

"That she needs help," Oliver replies, eyes sliding back to Thea's feral gaze once again. "Fast. Before she's lost to the mirakuru forever, like my friend was."

Slade's laugh is deep and ugly, but Oliver never looks away from his sister. That same spark is back, there one second and gone the next. But it's *there*. Thea huffs, blinking, shaking her head. Is it recognition he sees in her eyes? Some glimpse of the woman he knows still buried in there somewhere?

"And how do you intend to save her, Oliver? Enlighten me," Slade commands. "Better yet, how do you intend to save *yourself*? Backup or

not, you can't beat me. You never could."

"I don't have to beat you, Slade," Oliver tells him. "This isn't a battle."

Felicity makes a pained noise in his ear. She doesn't like this plan. She hadn't from the moment they'd discussed it over the comms as he and the others had made their way here, but there isn't much of a choice and this is by far Thea's best bet.

Oliver replaces his arrow, flipping his bow in hand before stepping closer. "This is an exchange."

Slade's eyebrows shoot up in blatant amusement. It's unsettling as hell, making his empty eye sockets stretch.

"*You*?" Slade asks. "You want to trade yourself? For *her*?"

"It's always been me you wanted, Slade," Oliver reminds him. "Let her go and I'll go wherever you want. Back to Lian Yu. Anywhere. You can have your revenge. *Now*. Instead of… what? Waiting a few months until you've trained her to do it for you? Do you really want to hand-hold another person through learning to slap water?"

The reference to Shado has Slade jerking violently, shaking Thea in the process as he tightens his jaw, his whole face curling in distaste. It's risky as hell, given he literally still has his claws in Thea, but it's worth it if it means pushing Slade into doing something stupid.

He just needs to get close, just once. He just needs an opening.

Slade's hand trembles on Thea's shoulder. He's jittery, Oliver realizes, far more wired than he'd like anyone to believe. The anger coursing through Slade's veins has more control than he's used to. His face reddens, his nostrils flaring as he spits out, "If you were half the strategist she had been, you wouldn't be in this position in the first place."

His rationality has taken a backseat to fury. It makes him vulnerable, but it also makes him infinitely more dangerous.

"Neither would you," Oliver points out. "She should have survived us both. But here we are."

"Yes," Slade agrees, his voice dripping with hatred and the vileness of disdain. "Here. We. Are... For the moment."

Oliver nods solemnly. "For the moment," he agrees.

The atmosphere grows heavy, rife with meaning. One of them won't be walking out of this hangar bay alive and, in that instant, they both know it. The time for games is done. There are no more near misses, no more second chances or reprieves. In some ways, that knowledge is fortifying. There's no conflict within Oliver about what he needs to do, not anymore. And he doesn't regret what has to happen next. If anything, there's a sense of peace about it. His friend died years ago and now he gets to lay him to rest. It's time. It's *past* time.

"You've made one very large mistake, Oliver," Slade tells him, his voice deadly. "You assume I need to train your baby sister. I don't. All I need is her hatred and she is *filled* with it. Whether she kills you or forces you to kill her, it doesn't matter. I'll still have won."

As if to punctuate his statement, Thea lurches and snarls at him. God, she seems more like a rabid dog than his sister. The sight guts him, but it also redoubles his commitment to end this, to save her and bring her home where they can cure her and get her back to normal.

Oliver shakes his head, his eyes on Thea as he responds with a soft, "You're wrong." His voice is filled with a newfound certainty, with something he wouldn't have known a few months ago. He wouldn't have fully realized the truth behind his words, but he knows it now. Because of Ellie. Because of Felicity. Because of everything he's learned, thanks to the bond he's formed with them in the little moments that have filled their days with a happiness and joy he'd never felt entitled to before. A joy he was given anyway, despite his ardent beliefs. Oliver stares at Thea, almost in wonder. "You're wrong because no matter how much you hate me, no matter how much *she* hates me, I will always love her more."

Slade merely grins. "We'll see about that, won't we?"

He releases Thea, unleashing the worst sort of fury Oliver's ever seen.

Thea's violent, unhinged, a torrent of primal emotion unrestrained by higher thought. She's always been fast - his Speedy - but the rate she crosses the room is almost inhuman.

He's ready for her though, by the time she gets to him. As ready as he can be, anyhow. Feet planted apart, he's braced for her collision and he manages to stay standing, swerving to avoid her fist as she swings wildly at him. Slade's mad laughter rings in the background, a booming roar of amusement at his expense as Oliver uses every

moment of the last decade's experiences to counter his sister's assault. There's no finesse in her movements, no plan, no ulterior motive. Her punches and kicks are sloppy and uneven, but it doesn't matter.

Slade was right about one thing - an unreliable weapon is at least as dangerous as a finely-tuned one.

And her reserves are endless, the mirakuru a self-replicating poison that will have her going until the one thing she wants is done: killing him.

Oliver swerves back to avoid a right hook with a desperate, "*Thea.*"

She ignores him, trying to throw a body punch that he dodges, before moving to sock him with her fists again. One lands, but it's way off, gliding over his cheekbone without any real collision. She doesn't have the advantage of surprise on her side this time, and he isn't bone-weary from a brutal fight to the death with a trained assassin. Still, he feels the power in her, and he knows if she gets one good hit in, she will cause real damage.

Her lack of discipline demands he counter with precision, with carefully measured hits. She's falling into a pattern - all brute force, aiming for the most obvious damage. If she's going to be wild and unpredictable, then he needs to use that to his advantage as best he can.

"Thea, please," he says, blocking a punch. The force of it rattles his bones and he winces. "I want to help you. We all want to help you."

"Stop *lying to me*!" she screams, pausing long enough to glare at him. The hatred in her eyes hurts him more than any punch she could throw. "You can't help me. You do nothing *but* lie and kill. You aren't capable of anything else!"

She launches herself at him again and Oliver instantly falls back. "I won't lie to you again," he vows. "Not ever. And I refuse to kill you."

"Then you'll die," she hisses viciously.

"Thea," he implores, his hands going down for a split second, trying to get through to her. "*Please…*"

She moves fast, too fast for him to see, and rams the flat of her palm up into his nose. Pain explodes in his head and he cries out, reeling back a few steps, his hands flying to his face. He thinks he hears

Felicity calling his name over the comm, but it's quickly drowned out by blood rushing through his head, making his nose throb. His eyes water and blood spills down the back of his throat.

Thea doesn't give him a second. She charges him, bowling him over. It's a true testament to the strength the mirakuru gives her as she lifts him right off his feet before slamming him into the ground. The hard concrete collides with his body like it wants to shatter him into a million pieces before they slide a few feet, the rough floor nearly cutting through his leather.

Felicity makes another pained noise in his ear, but he ignores it, because he has to.

"Thea!" Oliver barks, but she isn't listening.

His sister swings wildly at his face and he instantly brings his arms up, blocking every blow. The hits rattle him, making him nauseous as he tries to stay his ground under the assault. It's only when she pulls back too far, looking like she's aiming for *more* power behind her next punch, that Oliver moves. He grabs her, twisting her away as he bucks her off, sending her face-first into the concrete. Paying no heed to his own shaking - he isn't sure if it's because of her assault or horror at what's happening - he flips himself back up onto his feet, backpedaling to put distance between them, his hands going up to ward her off as she clambers back to her feet.

"Wait…" he manages.

And she does.

Thea pauses long enough to wipe at her lip. It's bloody, a thick gash across her chin and lower lip. She stares at her fingers, at the bright, wet red. The laugh she gives is short and sharp, showing blood-stained teeth. Her grin has more blood flowing down her chin.

"Ever heard that actions speak louder than words, Ollie?" she asks. She spits a mouthful of blood onto the floor. "You can keep your love for me, I don't want it. This is who you are. You're a violent killer, and you can't hide it."

A week ago, her words would have crippled him. They *had* crippled him, in fact. They'd been the guiding force in his search for her, the point where his guilt had sprung up, his regret, his fear and sadness and grief…

But not this time.

Oliver hears Felicity inhale sharply, his name on her lips. He hears Ellie singing in the background, some song about a train full of zoo animals. It grounds him, reminds him that he's more than what she says. More than what she believes. He is a killer, when he needs to be, but that's not all he is. And he won't allow himself to be defined by those actions alone.

"And what are you, Thea?" Oliver counters. "What have you become? Are you really going to kill me? Because you won't be able to hide that either."

"I'm not *you*," Thea replies. "I'm Thea Merlyn." Oliver gasps, unable to stop himself from jerking away from her at that, a shiver falling down his spine. She smiles, and it's so reminiscent of the smile Malcolm Merlyn had given him moments before Oliver had taken his life. "I'm my father's daughter, and I will avenge his murder, if it's the last thing I do."

"No," Oliver says, shaking his head. "No, that man was not your father."

"He was," she growls, and then she moves to charge him again.

A thud of feet hitting the ground nearby stops her short. They all turn towards it - Oliver moves to tell him to go, that it's too dangerous; Slade frowns, scenting the air, clearly discerning who's joined them; and Thea…

"You're not…" She falters, completely, every bit of her nearly collapsing. Her hands fall, her face growing pale as she shakes her head. "You aren't real." Now that she's stopped moving, Oliver can see her shaking. She takes a step back before stopping herself. She clenches her fists tightly, a white-knuckled burning grip. He knows her nails are digging into her own palms, but she doesn't flinch. "You're not *here*."

"I am," Roy responds. He takes a cautious step towards her, his hands up, trying to placate her. "I'm here, Thea. I'm…" His voice shakes, echoing the genuine softness on his face. "I'm okay now. I'm better. And you can be, too."

"*No*."

"Yes," he counters. He takes another step and this time Thea responds,

stepping back as well. "Thea, please. Let us help you. Let *me* help you."

Thea huffs, shaking her head again, trying to shake off what she clearly believes is a hallucination. But for an instant there's a flash of recognition in her eyes, a hint of the Thea he knows, the one he watched grow up. But it's only momentary, there one second and gone the next, that girl once again smothered by the mirakuru, until she's drowning in it once more.

"No!" she shouts, turning back to Oliver, her voice growing louder, more desperate, more shrill with each word. "You did this. You did this to me. You're making me see him. You probably killed him, too!"

"No," Roy interjects, using her distraction to close more of the distance between them. Oliver puts his hand up to ward him off, but Roy ignores him. He only has eyes for Thea, who whips her head back to him again. "I'm here, Thea. I'm alive." He takes a few more steps, putting himself between her and her brother. He holds out his hand. "Here… I'm here. We're both here. And I want to help you."

That same glimpse of recognition flashes through her eyes.

Her movements are jerky, twitchy, like she's warring with herself. For the first time since he's walked into the warehouse, Oliver feels a glimmer of hope, a glimmer he wants to latch on to. She shouldn't be able to do that, not on mirakuru. Nothing should be able to get through to her. But then Thea's survived her own island over the years - losing her father and brother, battling drugs and alcohol, watching her mother on trial for mass murder, seeing her other father die. None of it's been easy, and maybe she's been reforged into something stronger than he'd assumed.

And then there's Roy, someone who was an anchor for her through some of those times. And now he's here, being that anchor, the one she so desperately needs…

Watching her fight against the serum in her veins is breathtaking. Even if she can't throw it off completely, that she can fight it at all blows Oliver's mind. He's not sure he's ever been prouder of his little sister than he is right now as he watches her fight for herself.

"*No*."

Slade's sharp bark of a denial rings out as he stalks toward them, ready to take matters into his own hands. Thea might be torn, but Slade's not. While she hesitates, squared off against Roy

apprehensively with a tentative kind of hope glazing her eyes, Slade closes the distance between them.

But he doesn't go for Thea or Roy.

It's Oliver he wants. It's always *been* Oliver.

This has always been his battle, his responsibility, and Oliver's finally ready for it. Because he knows what he stands to lose and he knows what he stands to gain. There's no question in his mind what needs to be done.

Oliver and Slade collide with a furious cry and the sound of fists meeting flesh.

If fighting Thea was like a match of shadow boxing - all parries and blocks - fighting with Slade is like jumping into the ring with an unleashed hurricane of rage. It's a flurry of moves so fast and hard Oliver can barely keep up with what either of them are doing. Instinct takes over, self-preservation guiding his every move, his every block, his every attack. And he *needs* it. It doesn't matter that Slade can't see - he knows Oliver, and his other senses are so heightened that Oliver truly believes him in his belief that vision hinders. Each of his punches and kicks land with an accuracy that is startling. Oliver can only respond in kind.

They move across the space, a violent torrent of destruction that takes victims in their wake.

At one point Oliver advances on Slade with such intent that he forces the other man backwards before the tables turn. Slade grips him tight, throwing him across the room to slam into one of the walls, denting the aluminum siding. Oliver sweeps Slade's feet out from underneath him. His nemesis swings an arm with clear intent to ram his fist through Oliver's skull, but he moves at the last second, leaving Slade's knuckles to embed in the concrete floor. Regrouping with startling speed, Slade's bloodied fist cracks against Oliver's cheekbone and Oliver responds by almost breaking his arm. He *does* snap three of Slade's fingers, just before Slade delivers a body shot that Oliver's pretty sure breaks a rib. Every breath is a struggle by the time Oliver grabs Slade, ramming his forehead into his. It earns a short reprieve, though, as the other man stumbles backwards, shaking his head and huffing out a breath like an angered bull.

They're both brutal in their assault on the other. Slade's fists are punishing, but after the first few seconds, Oliver doesn't feel any of it.

He's too driven, too focused to feel any pain. He tastes blood, smells it, but he doesn't care if it's his or Slade's. He won't care until this is done.

Oliver holds his own, because there's no alternative. He matches Slade blow for blow, mirakuru or not.

At least, he does for a while.

A sudden whoosh cuts through the grunts of exertion and hisses of pain right before Thea cries out. It's sharp and loud, instantly pulling Oliver's attention back to his sister. There's a dart in her side, and her eyes are wide, disbelieving as she stares at it. She moves to take it out with trembling fingers, but she doesn't get the chance. She collapses, crumbling right against Roy.

Diggle and Sara step out of the shadows, Sara sending another dart in Thea's direction.

The cure. She's hitting Thea with the cure now that she's got a clear shot and Slade's firmly out of her line of sight.

Relief hits him so hard he can't help but gasp, a tiny smile pulling at his lips.

It *worked*.

The second Oliver turns his head though, Slade's on him, wrapping his arm around Oliver's neck.

His air's cut off abruptly, and the attempt to gulp some back is as painful as it is futile. Terror bolts through him, a living thing that travels across the surface of his skin, sinks into his very being, because Slade will kill him.

The tiniest slip up could cost him everything.

"You can't be too surprised about losing, Oliver," Slade hisses in his ear. His gritty voice is nearly drowned out by a loud burst of noise, but the roar of blood in his veins dominates everything. Slade squeezes harder and Oliver gasps for air, clawing at his arm, fighting to live. Black spots dance in front of his eyes. "You never had a way to beat me."

Oliver can feel his grip on consciousness slipping away. He thinks he hears shouting, hears gunshots… but then suddenly there's nothing.

Slade's forearm presses in even harder, right against his windpipe. His lungs seize, his heart pounding wildly, a strange pressure building in his skull. He feels his legs moving, feels them kicking just as much as he feels his hands grappling at Slade's arm. A quick flash of something fills his mind's eyes, for a split second - it's warm, content… he hears laughter - *Felicity… Ellie… Nate…* - and then…

"Now, Oliver!" Felicity shouts in his ear, and his eyes snap back open. "Do it now!"

The urgency in her voice is like a shot of adrenaline right in his chest. It drives him past the oxygen deprivation and the terror that's seeped into his skin. His hands don't even seem connected anymore, nearly numb, clumsy and slow as he fumbles at his side. The rough edges of the seam of his leather pants catch his glove as he tries to find the one thing that might save him in all of this.

He feels like he's fighting his way through molasses, his arm struggling to follow his command, but then his fingers close around the small weapon at his side. He clutches it like it's a lifeline.

Because it is.

With every ounce of strength he has, Oliver jams the needle into Slade's neck. He presses his thumb down against the syringe, flooding the other man's veins with every ounce of the formula within.

Slade jerks in surprise, his arm letting up. Oliver instantly slips free, but he doesn't get far. His body gives out right there and he falls to the ground, sucking in air like a drowning man. He tries to scramble backwards, away from Slade, who leans over in a violent convulsion that nearly sends him to the ground, too.

Tremors rock through Slade, his muscles seizing in response to the poison flowing through his system.

It takes him all of a second to realize what Oliver's given him. He tilts his head down towards Oliver, his voice rough as he whispers, "Mirakuru? You gave me more?"

He starts laughing, and it's nearly maniacal as it fills the air around them. His shaking gets worse, and his anger becomes a physical presence as he suddenly stands tall, throwing his arms out. Oliver can *see* the mirakuru flowing through him, reinvigorating him, slipping into the broken spaces the cure had left behind. It's not possible, but Oliver swears he gets bigger where he towers over him. Slade makes

tight fists, bowing his head.

When he looks up again, Oliver can *see* the fibers in his eyes starting to rebuild, to string together, recreating his eyes.

Oliver wants to throw up.

Oh God, what if they'd been wrong?

"*Isolating the mirakuru in Slade's blood wasn't the hard part. We got that and we broke it down pretty easily right at the start. But when we gave him the cure, it didn't… It's like garbage in his bloodstream now. It's in pieces, separating out, right? But it's going nowhere. It isn't breaking down and disappearing, it isn't leaving his body. And… it looks like it might even be bonding with the epinephrine and norepinephrine his body produces naturally. Like… the rage that mirakuru produces - or I guess it'd be more accurate to say it adds to it? I don't know yet and okay, stop with the glaring, I'm getting to my point. The rage is building in him but it can't dissipate. Now, the hard and admittedly terrifying part is that it might make him even more powerful, even more dangerous… but he is still human. He can't possibly survive under the onslaught that would create.*"

But one thing Oliver hadn't stop to think about, to think about, was that mirakuru also heals, at a ridiculous rate. They'd thought giving him more would push him over the edge, but what if it was just fueling the healing rate, and his body was simultaneously destroying and healing itself in the same breath? Leaving nothing but a stronger, more viciously angry and dangerous Slade?

Slade starts twitching, his head jerking violently. Each move has so much power Oliver thinks he's going to break his own bones, but he never does.

What have they done?

Felicity's whispered, "Oh no," confirms he isn't the only one worried.

Stark terror slams into Oliver's chest and he scrambles back further, trying to push himself up to his feet, but his muscles are useless, his bones liquid.

"It didn't work," Diggle says behind him. And then he's there, gripping Oliver under the arms, helping him up. "We have to go, Oliver."

"No," Oliver snaps in response. "We can't leave him." He pushes Digg back, turning to look at him, at Sara, at Roy, who cradles Thea's lax

form in his arms. They achieved what they came here to do, they got Thea, they saved her. "Go," he orders Roy. "Get her out of here. Now."

"Damn it, Oliver," Diggle murmurs, but he doesn't leave. They've faced Slade before and they've more than lost, but the other man knows he's right. They might not have the manpower for this, but they can't leave him. Digg unholsters his gun and grabs one of the extra clips he keeps on his belt. Reloading his weapon, he shares a meaningful look with Sara before looking back at Oliver. "How much of the cure do we have left?"

"Hopefully enough," Oliver replies, taking out the darts he has. Sara and Diggle follow suit. It's not a lot, not even close. But it'll have to do.

"Oliver," Felicity breathes in his ear. "Be careful."

"Always," he replies. She gives him a nervous snort on the other side.

He palms the darts filled with the new and improved cure, gripping them in a tight fist. Roy's still there, still hesitating, and Oliver narrows his eyes. "Roy, *go*. Get her out of here."

"Take my darts," Roy says, closing the space between them. Sara grabs them off his belt, but before he goes, his eyes find Oliver. In that split second he sees all the gratitude and regret and pain that Roy usually keeps so well-hidden. Just in case Oliver doesn't survive this, in case none of them do.

And then with a nod, he goes, running as fast as he can with an unconscious Thea in his arms.

Relief nearly bowls Oliver over - his sister is safe.

The lack of anxiety doesn't last long.

They all feel the air changing around them, feel the shift in the particles as something wholly unnatural suddenly comes to life behind them. Oliver can *feel* Slade's presence at his back, and he doesn't have to see the way Sara's eyes widen in horror or the way Diggle tries to grab Oliver's jacket to yank him away.

None of them have time to move, to do anything, before Slade is there.

Slade sends a bone-crunching fist right into Oliver's kidney. Pain

shoots through him so sharp and unexpected that his entire body seizes. He jerks up, his spine straightening with a crack that makes Oliver's blood run cold as he drops the darts, drops his bow. He doesn't get the chance to collapse or fall, because Slade is already there, gripping the side of his neck with bruising force and throwing him to the ground.

Oliver's shoulder and head collide with the concrete. Bursts of white explode against his lids before darkness takes over.

It lasts all of ten seconds, but it's the longest ten of his life. He doesn't see anything, nothing happens except for a never-ending blackness. But at the same time, he closes his eyes and opens them up just as quickly. The only evidence any time passed is the sound of pained grunts and something breaking.

Someone screaming.

No.

Oliver rolls over. Something wet leaks down his forehead, and his lips are covered in copper. He spits, forcing his eyes open, gritting his teeth against the white hot pain that sears through one side of his body. He sits up, looking around…

Diggle is unconscious on the ground next to him, a tiny pool of blood leaking from the back of his head. Oliver groans his name, but the other man doesn't respond. He wants to reach over, to make sure he's at least breathing, but the scream from a second ago echoes through his head.

"*Sara*!"

Oliver shoves himself to his feet, and instantly regrets the fast move because he tumbles right back over, landing painfully on his hands and knees. His arms nearly give out, but he ignores it, pushing himself up again, looking for her…

There.

Sara dodges one of Slade's fists, but only barely, dancing back. It's obvious something's wrong with one foot and her left arm hangs limply against her side, dislocated so badly Oliver wonders if Slade didn't tear right through her tendons in the process. But Sara isn't giving up, not even close. Her wig and mask are gone, blood staining her neck. Her suit's cut up, exposing deep slices in her skin. Oliver

can't even begin to fathom where those came from, because Slade isn't holding a weapon. It's almost like he'd gotten his hands on her and had *twisted*, so hard and with so much pressure, her skin had literally broken under his touch.

Oliver climbs to his feet, stopping long enough to grab the cure darts on the floor. He grips them tight, lurching towards them. He's too far away, and his knee and shoulder are sending lava through his veins, making his vision spotty and uneven, but he keeps moving. Especially when Slade wraps his arm around Sara's throat and lifts her up. It's exactly what he'd done when Ellie had first arrived, when Slade had found them in the foundry. Her feet kick wildly, her right hand clawing at him. But this time Slade isn't looking to just get her out of the way, no. He wants to kill her.

Sara blanches, her mouth opening and closing as she gasps for air. Her face turns red, bright red, before purple and blue start to discolor the skin as Slade squeezes harder and harder.

"No!" Oliver shouts, throwing himself at them.

Slade turns just in time, and Oliver has a second to appreciate the sight of his eyes growing back, but they're all wrong. They're bloodshot and pure black, and the skin around them is still broken and bloody. All the blood vessels in his face are visible, filled with a bloody green mixture that stick out brightly against Slade's too-pale skin. Something bloody and frothy seeps from his lips, leaking down his chin and neck.

"Oliver," he says, the words wet and mulchy.

Before Oliver can reach him, Slade drops Sara and spins with incredibly speed. Before Sara even hits the ground, he's already facing Oliver and with one hand, he grips the front of Oliver's jacket and lifts him up. But not to throw him. In the same breath and with a roar that Oliver will hear for the rest of his life, Slade slams him back into the ground.

Oliver screams in pain.

The cure darts go flying, scattering across the floor.

Slade straddles him, pinning him to the ground before letting his fists fall. It's instinct and years of training that have Oliver dodging most of them, but some of them land and the ugly breaking noises that follow make Oliver's gut twist.

Oliver feels his own fists moving to ward Slade off, but it all doesn't feel like enough, not by a longshot. He feels something wet on his face, hears shouting and screams, grunts of pain. Slade screams at him, about Shado, about how he betrayed him, how he hurt him, how he doesn't deserve anything but death. He promises him he's going to find Oliver's family, he's going to kill every last thing that Oliver loves.

He's going to die.

No. No, Oliver wants to live. He wants to see his Felicity, his Ellie… he wants to meet his future son and the unborn child they've only just learned about. He wants to marry the most remarkable woman he's ever met and have the kind of life he never thought was within his grasp.

It's that perseverance that keeps him there, keeps him fighting… all the way to the end. All the way to the moment Slade suddenly *stops*. Oliver wrenches his eyes open, staring up at him, and it's only then that he realizes the wetness he was feeling was the white spittle leaking from Slade's lips… the thin black ooze coming from his eyes… the blood starting to seep from all the vessels pushing to the surface.

"What?" Slade rasps wetly, looking down at his hands. All his veins are pushing to the surface, nearly black in color, pulsing in a way that's too fast to be a heartbeat. They bulge before they start ripping through his skin, sending tiny rivulets of green-laced blood streaming down his arms… his face, his neck, his chest…

Everywhere.

"No," Slade gasps, shaking. He screams it, his voice rattling through the entire warehouse. He looks back at Oliver, but the eyes he'd started to grow back are disappearing; *melting*. It's a sight Oliver will never forget. Slade lurches towards him, nearly falling on top of him. He moves to grab Oliver's throat, growling, "*What did you do*?" but when he touches Oliver, he has no grip.

The wet, breaking sound Oliver had heard had been Slade; he'd been breaking his own bones with each hit.

It was working. The overdose of mirakuru was *working*.

"What…?" Slade starts, his voice a mess of rage and hatred, unhinged and horrifying. He snaps at Oliver, like a wild animal, sending spittle and blood everywhere as he shouts, "What did you…?"

He cuts himself off with a loud, pained groan, one that comes from deep in his chest.

Slade doubles over, more vessels bursting, more bones splintering, his breath growing labored and uneven, like his lungs have evaporated or thinned past the point of usefulness. He falls over to the side, landing with an ugly sound that turns Oliver's stomach as the other man screams. Oliver pushes himself up, to get away from him. Slade reaches for him, even as his own rage and hatred consumes him, all of it still focused on Oliver…

He reaches for him, but it's useless.

"I never needed a way to beat you, Slade," Oliver says, his voice cracking. "Your own hatred was always going to do that on its own."

The roar Slade lets loose is deafening, a guttural scream borne of insurmountable fury and bone-deep frustration.

As much as Oliver had once called this man his brother, as much as he still regrets what became of him, the relief he feels is immense. Slade convulses on the floor, black blood slipping from his lips, covering the ground in sprays of harsh breaths. His skin falls apart like tissue paper, his insides melting, a long drawn out scream ending in a bloody gurgle before he finally falls still. As Slade's voice echoes through the warehouse, Oliver realizes the relief he feels isn't just for himself. It isn't just for his family, either. It's for the friend he'd once cared so much about, the man who'd died on that island just as surely as Shado had.

It's over.

He isn't sure how long he stays there, staring at Slade's body, almost like he's waiting for him to come back… but he doesn't. The pool of blood around him grows bigger, his skin sloughing off, leaving ashy bone shining through in some spots.

It's gruesome and horrifying and Oliver can't look away… and he doesn't, not until he hears a groan from behind him.

Diggle.

And then he hears something else, from Sara… and something else, farther away.

Roy.

Thea.

They're okay. As okay as they can be.

Oliver doesn't move, because he can't take his eyes off Slade.

It'd worked. Their plan had worked. Slade's own rage and hatred killed him, consumed him whole. The mirakuru had turned on him, his body no longer able to handle it… It'd eaten away at him until there was nothing left, finishing the job it had started back on Lian Yu so many years ago.

Oliver takes comfort in the movement he hears around him. He hears Sara moving, Diggle… Roy where he's making his way back in to check on them…

"Felicity?" he croaks. No response. He fumbles for his comm, clicking it, whispering her name until it turns back on, until he finally hears her on the other side.

She's crying. Oliver's eyes finally slip shut. He takes a deep breath, wincing when his ribs scream in protest, but the fact that he can…

God, it's *everything*.

He survived.

They won.

"Felicity…"

"Oliver," she whispers. Her voice cracks, her breath hitching. "Come home. Come home, right now, so I can yell at you and kiss you and yell at you some more and…"

He lets out a breathy chuckle. He loves her so much. God, he loves her. And he gets to keep loving her. Because they won. Against all odds, they triumphed, through determination and sheer force of will. Because he had so very much to fight for, so much to *live* for. And now… now he can.

"Come home, Oliver."

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

> Longest chapter we've had in a while, so buckle in for the long haul, guys! Bre and I are both still hoping to have an update next Monday while we're at HVFF San Jose, but we can't be sure yet if that's gonna happen. Sorry for the uncertainty. We've had a few people ask if they could meet us while we're there and um... OF COURSE. I'll be wearing a black ballcap that says Java, Bre's wearing a "Frak Cancer" shirt, and we will both be updating our Twitter accounts frequently with where we're at and what we're doing. Please come up and say hi if you see us! There's nothing we like more than talking about our fics, really. Side note, we are participating in OFBB again this year and it's a related story to this one. "Five Times Ellie Queen Had The Worst Timing In The World (and one time it was pretty perfect)" will post a chapter a week every Friday for the next six weeks. Keep an eye out if you're interested. It will be linked as a related work. Now... I'll leave you with this lengthy chapter. Enjoy!

The van is silent as they make their way back to the manor.

Despite feeling like one giant bruise and having to fight to breathe normally, Oliver's the one who winds up driving - Sara can't even use one arm and while Diggle is conscious again, his head wound means he won't be getting behind the wheel anytime soon. Roy had fared the best of them, but when it'd come time to go home, he'd just climbed into the back of the van with Thea in his arms. When Oliver had stared at him, Roy had just stared back, making it clear he was unwilling to release her. Glancing in the rearview mirror, he watches as Roy closes his eyes, pressing his cheek to Thea's forehead, cradling her protectively. For all that Oliver would prefer to be the one holding onto Thea, Roy's place in her life is clear. Oliver hadn't even thought it was *possible* for someone to get through to a person lost in a mirakuru rage as Thea had been.

It makes him wonder if Shado could have broken through to Slade, had she survived.

His thoughts don't linger there though. They don't need to, not anymore.

The man that died back in the hangar wasn't his friend, the man he'd once thought of as a brother, and his death hadn't been Oliver's fault, just like what happened to Shado had been outside his control. It still hits him hard, sometimes, because she was his friend, just like Slade had been. But thinking back on his time with Shado and Slade no longer leaves him with a souring feeling of regret tainting it all.

He's free to move on. To focus on the present - on being fully aware of how precious every joyful moment is - and to look to the future.

When they reach the manor, Oliver pulls around to the back, to an obscured service entrance that's hidden by a healthy wall of trees. As he puts the van in park, he glances in the mirror again. Roy doesn't move to get out, not yet. Instead, he presses his face into Thea's hair, taking a deep breath. It makes Oliver wonder if he's not the only one who has recently gained a better understanding of the importance of savoring each moment.

Sara sits up, letting out a muted grunt before reaching for the door.

"You got it?" Digg asks.

"I do have two arms, you know," she croaks out, her voice as bruised as her body. The words are dismissive, but the way she rolls her eyes and smiles at him betrays her appreciation for his concern.

"Yeah, but both of mine work," Digg tosses back good-naturedly.

It doesn't stop Sara from opening the door with her good arm and sliding out of the van. Oliver can tell she tries to hide her wince, but she can't. Digg gently shakes his head with a sigh, simply following suit. Oliver does the same, making his way around the van in time to see Diggle offering his arm to her, but Sara waves him off, shuffling into the manor on her own.

"I appreciate it, Diggle, but trust me, you'll know when I need help."

"When's that?" Digg asks. "When you're completely unconscious?"

Sara chuckles, but they're too far away for Oliver to hear her answer.

Oliver tries to hide his own injury, hobbling as he reaches the back of the van. It's just in time to catch Roy climbing out awkwardly, Thea limp in his arms.

"I'll get her," Oliver half-offers, half-orders, moving to do just that. "Let

me take her."

"No offense," Roy starts, his grip on Thea tightening, as if he's afraid Oliver might just scoop her away, "but I'm not sure how you've got *you* at this point."

Oliver wants to fight him. His palms itch to hold his sister, to reassure himself that she's *here* after everything they've just fought through. But Roy's also right. Oliver thinks his bruises might have bruises at this point and the adrenaline of the battle is fading fast, taking with it all the borrowed strength and stamina as it goes.

He gives him a small nod, conceding both Roy's point as well as his place in his sister's life.

A flash of gratitude skates over Roy's face and he nods back before taking Thea into the house.

"Oliver!"

Her voice precedes her by barely a second before he sees Felicity pushing through the service doors and heading straight for him.

"Hey," he breathes just as she reaches him.

She's careful, her hands drifting over his chest and arms, just hovering before she softly pulls him into her arms, so gently it makes his heart hurt. Doing a mental inventory of him, she whispers his name before pulling back. She winces as she takes in his face, pulling her hand up to hover over his cheek where Slade had pummelled him, her fingertips a hairsbreadth from touching his skin, her eyes pained for him. That says a helluva lot more about his physical state than the throbbing of his bruises do. She's seen him after fights before, some every inch as close as this one had been, but he's never seen her react quite like this.

Maybe it's that they're together now. Maybe it's the pregnancy hormones. Or maybe it's really just that bad, he's not sure.

"I'm okay," he assures her. It's almost true. He *will* be okay, after several rounds of ice packs and a fist full of painkillers.

Felicity nods, but her touch is just as gentle as her hands fall down his arms next. "I know I said I'd yell at you and hit you, but that seems redundant at this point."

"I won't object if you pass on that," he replies. He smiles, even though it hurts. "But I will take that kiss you mentioned."

Her smile is uneven and filled to the brim with emotion - she needs it as much as he does.

Felicity pushes up on her toes, cupping his face ever-so-gently before pressing her lips to his. They're unbelievably soft. It's all relief and fortifying reassurance that they're past one more hurdle in the way of the future they both want. There's a hint of passion simmering beneath the surface, a reaction to the life-or-death game they play, the fact that they triumphed once more, but that's not the focus. Not this time. Right now he's just so grateful to be home.

Oliver sags against her, sighing against her lips. The kiss is nothing near their usual level, but a shudder of tingles still spreads out across his skin in response to her loving touch.

The bruises don't hurt quite as much anymore.

When she pulls away, he follows after her, not wanting it to be over. He bites his lips, chasing the taste of her on his skin as he presses his forehead to hers. His hands settle on her hips, his fingers digging in. He can feel the torn skin over his knuckles, the dried blood, but he doesn't care about that. He needs this, needs *her*. Always.

"How about we get you cleaned up," Felicity says, sliding a hand down his arm. Her touch is so soft he barely feels it. "And have Caitlin look you over."

Oliver shakes his head. "She needs to see to Thea first." He looks up in time to see Roy reaching the doors over Felicity's shoulder, carrying his sister toward the house where their mother hovers. "And Sara. She got the worst of it."

Felicity taps his sternum lightly. "You didn't exactly have it easy either, mister."

"I know," he agrees. He closes his eyes, leaning into her again. "That was…" Oliver lets out a huff of air and shakes his head. "That was hard."

"But you made it," Felicity points out. She looks up at him, pride shining from her eyes, and when she smiles, it makes his heart flip. "We made it."

"We did," he replies, his smile matching hers as he moves in for another chaste kiss. God, it's perfect. It's everything. And then Oliver takes a moment to realize what's missing from this little reunion. "Is Ellie napping?"

Felicity snorts and raises an eyebrow at him before tilting her head toward an upstairs window. "There's a negative percent chance of that happening anytime soon," she informs him. "Not with you back and Thea here."

Oliver looks up to find Ellie bouncing in front of a window of one of the offices, waving wildly with Lyla standing right behind her. He chuckles, waving back. She squeals, loud enough he can hear it through the shut window, before she bends down and cracks it open a couple of inches. She tilts her head sideways and presses her mouth right against the screen. "Hi Daddy!" she shouts, the words coming out slightly muffled as the press of the screen keeps her lips from moving normally.

Felicity wrinkles her nose. "Ellie, baby, that's gross," she yells back up. "That screen is there to catch bugs. Go wash off your mouth. Daddy and I will be up in a minute."

"Okay!" she yells back in a sing-song voice, face still plastered against the screen until Lyla scoops her up, disappearing from view.

"She's a *bit* hyped. I had to bribe her with candy to keep her from running down and tackling you and Thea." Felicity winces, biting her lip. "Don't judge me. I know that's a definite no in Parenting 101."

Oliver laughs. It hurts, way more than he wants to admit, but it doesn't stop him, because it feels *good*. He takes a moment to breathe, to savor this moment where everything is finally going right. Peace is an incredible sensation, and he's not even surprised to find he's most definitely getting used to it.

"I love you," he says. Felicity's grin in response is nearly blinding. He grabs her hand, kissing her palm. "Come on." He nods towards the door. "I want to stick with Thea, see what Caitlin has to say. And should you even be out here?" Now it's his turn to look her over. "Have you rested at all?"

Felicity scoffs. "I'm totally better. Caitlin was even impressed. No more stair carrying for me. Especially not by you, because I'm pretty sure *you're* the one pushing it at the moment."

His answering grumble is blatant annoyance, neither an agreement nor disagreement. She's right, obviously, and he knows that, but it doesn't mean he has to admit it.

She makes some sort of affirmative noise, a '*That's what I thought*' noise before wrapping her arm around his waist, turning them back to the house.

In place of an actual response, Oliver lets his hand drift down her hip. His fingers graze over the seam of her pants before getting a healthy handful of her backside.

"Oliver," Felicity says, followed by a disbelieving chuckle as her hand drops to cover his, because this is so not the time or place. Not that that stops him. He may be hurt, but he's not dead, and his appreciation for the curve of her ass is very much alive and well. "Looks worse than it feels, huh?" she asks.

The grin that spreads across his lips is almost boyish as he shrugs one shoulder, palming her ass a little more fully.

"I've been worse," he replies. As much as adrenaline had fueled him before, some silly giddy feeling powers him now. Knowing so much of the danger they'd been terrified of is gone for good, that Thea and Ellie are both safe, that Felicity is finally doing well… He feels like he could fly, and the pain is so very distant… Felicity suddenly stopping in her tracks pulls him right out of that. He stops with her, glancing towards the doorway before looking back to her in confusion. "What is it?"

"I wasn't…" Felicity chews on the inside of her lip - *nervously*. All playfulness forgotten, Oliver steps closer, sliding his hand back up to her hip. She looks up at him. "I was going to wait, because… well, because I was. But you have had worse, Oliver."

He stares at her, not following. "Yeah…"

She meets his gaze, and her eyes are full of a meaning he can't quite grasp, not until she says, "Ellie didn't flicker." Even then, it takes a moment for them to register, for him to fully grasp what she's trying to say, but before the full impact of them can hit him, she's already talking, "That fight was at least as bad as the one in the kitchen. Your life today was every bit as in danger as it was that day." Her face is gravely serious, but it's the uncertainty along the edges that makes his chest tighten. "But Ellie stayed solid."

Not like last time.

It hits him like a wall of bricks ramming, sucking the air out of his lungs.

"She should have," he says slowly. "You're saying she should have, because…" He closes his eyes, and suddenly he's back in the hangar, Slade's arm wrapped around his throat. It was almost the exact same as it had been in the kitchen, the life being choked out of him, something warm and far-off pulling him further into the darkness. "Slade had me, he almost had me."

"Yeah," Felicity replies weakly.

"Why… why wouldn't she have flickered, like before?" His mind races to explain it, to make sense of it, but it can't. Because she should have, because her life's literally tied to his. "I'm… I'm glad she didn't, obviously. God." He holds Felicity closer, remembering the way she'd described how Ellie had suddenly started disappearing in her arms, and that was how she'd known something was very, very wrong. He pulls her against his chest. "But why? What does it mean?"

Felicity shakes her head, her mouth opening to respond, but she's got nothing. "I don't know, Oliver," she finally replies after a few seconds. "And neither does Cisco. We don't have any theories or anything, I just thought… I thought you should know. Just… because."

"Yeah," he says quietly. This should be a good thing, right? A sign that her place in their time is somehow more permanent. But she isn't from this time. She's from the future, which means her place there is permanent.

So what does that mean for *their* future, now?

He doesn't realize his hand slips out of hers until Felicity grabs for it again. "Hey," she says, lacing her fingers through his. "I'm not saying we need to be worried about it. It's… different, very different, but it's good. Because she's *here*. Solid and very here. I just… I thought we should be aware. That's all."

"Yeah," he repeats. The concern and oddly placed fear is still very present, but he also hears what she's saying. Because they don't know, and maybe they *can't* know. He squeezes her hand, and he's not sure if it's more for him or her. "This could mean everything's more set, right?"

Oliver expects her to agree - hell, he *needs* it - but she doesn't. Instead her lips part to speak, but she doesn't have anything to say again. Felicity cards her free hand through his hair before saying, "I have no idea. It could mean anything. Literally anything. But she's here, and she's safe. We all are." Her hand drifts down to his cheek, her thumb grazing over his stubble. "I didn't mean to freak you out, or to freak me out. For any freakout, really. Just for now… it happened."

"And she's okay, she's not…?"

"She's fine," Felicity replies. "She's more than fine, you saw her."

He cracks a grin at that, because he definitely did see her, in all her hopped-up-on-sugar glory. His Ellie…

"Let's focus on that," she suggests. "We'll figure out the why's and how's later."

He nods, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. He hears her, understands the words she's saying, but the concern doesn't dissipate, any more than hers does. They stare at each other, both of them recognizing that this is something. And they should pay attention. But they just don't know *how*.

Felicity's hand slips back up to his temple. "You're bleeding again," she says, stroking the tender skin there. The wound stings as sweat drips down the opposite side of his face, into the broken skin at his cheekbone. He grimaces at the fresh pain. "Let's get you to Caitlin."

Talk more later.

When things are less… well, less bloody and they've had a chance to decompress. To *process*. It's a reminder of their reality, that Ellie isn't theirs, *technically*, that while things may seem fine right now, they aren't as they're supposed to be. He really, really doesn't want to think about that, about any of that.

He wants to concentrate on the *now*.

"Come on," Felicity says, pulling him towards the door again. He obeys without second thought, following her, allowing her to lead him into the house and up the stairs.

She moves tenderly - though whether that's for his benefit or hers, he's not sure. She takes tentative steps up to the second floor at a slow pace, and while it's not the speed he would have chosen, he finds

himself grateful for it. He holds her up as much as he can, helping her as much as leaning on her, and he loves when she reciprocates.

The sound of soft chatter from the room Caitlin's set up in helps push everything down. It's Thea's room, one that's a few doors down from his and Felicity's bedroom. Felicity knows him well enough that she doesn't say a word when they don't stop for him to clean up, instead heading straight towards the voices to check on his sister. It's not exactly easier to concentrate on her than what Felicity just told him, but it's something he knows how to handle.

Even though it's only been a few minutes, it feels infinitely longer since he's been at her side. Too long. When they enter Caitlin's makeshift hospital room, his eyes fly to where he knows her bed is. Thea is there, laid out on the bedspread, an IV already hooked into her arm. Roy and his mother are at her side, the former holding her hand, the latter pulling the bedspread back, aiming to make her daughter as comfortable as possible.

They may be in his sister's room, but it's not Thea that Caitlin's tending to.

It's Sara.

The assassin can take an incredible amount of pain without so much as a whimper of noise - Oliver knows this first hand - but when Caitlin wrenches her arm, setting it back in place, even she lets out a string of Arabic with enough vitriol that he's certain it's curses.

"Sorry," Caitlin says with a grimace, more than well aware of what she's done. She checks to make sure it's in place, gently placing the still-limp arm in Sara's lap. It means she doesn't miss the next string of acid-filled words. "I'd suggest a painkiller-"

Sara huffs out a quick breath and a, "Nope, I'm good." She doesn't look good; she's far too pale and her lips are trembling from the pain, even as she tries to collect herself.

"A muscle relaxant then," Caitlin tries.

"How about some whisky?" Sara counters, looking up at the doctor.

Caitlin's face falters - she isn't thrilled at the idea, but she's also obviously figured out that it's fairly futile to go toe-to-toe with Sara on anything. "Okay," she agrees. "Take two and call me in the morning."

"Will do," Sara responds, shooting her a wink that probably would be far more salacious were she not shaking in actual pain.

Caitlin shakes her head - in amusement, as ill-placed as it might be - before removing her gloves, looking at Oliver. "Next patient?"

"No," Oliver says, shaking his head. He's far from the priority here, and even though Felicity huffs at his side, he nods to her bed. "Thea. She needs you most."

"Oliver," Felicity says in a low voice at his side, but Caitlin's already moving towards him.

"She's unconscious for at least a few hours," Caitlin advises. "The cure is working it's way through her system and I will be checking on her regularly the entire night." She glances back at Roy and Moira. "And I'm sure I won't be the only one. But," she adds, giving him a pointed look, "she's going to want her brother in one piece once she wakes up. So let me take a look at you. Please."

Caitlin's statements are questionable, at best. They have no way of knowing what Thea will want once she wakes up, much less *when* she will wake. Even if the cure works exactly like it did on Roy, she'd been so full of anger and rage, and she'd already been through so much trauma…

There's no guessing how it all will affect her, and he really, really wants to tell her to check on Thea, at least *once*… but he doesn't. Between Caitlin's urging and the press of Felicity's fingers against his spine, Oliver grits his teeth and nods, stepping towards the doctor.

Caitlin takes him in, a clinical once-over, mentally assessing what to do first, when she just stops. She pulls a face, looking more than a little sallow. He sort of starts to question her medical skills - it's not *that* bad - until she gestures at his shoulder. "You have, uh… you've got some… I think you've got a bit of Slade on you."

He doesn't have to look to where she's pointing to know she's probably right. Slade's death had been messy, to say the least, and he'd been right there for all of it.

It's a thought that clearly hadn't occurred to Felicity, though, and when she makes a sharp gagging noise, he turns in time to see her face taking on a green tinge before she darts for the bathroom.

For a second, Oliver's just as frozen as everyone else is, and even more

so when they all turn to stare at him.

"Honestly, Oliver," Moira says. He turns to look at her as she shakes her head at him in disbelief, her hands finding her hips. "Go hold your pregnant girlfriend's hair back while she's ill. You shouldn't need your mother to tell you that."

Oh… *oh.*

Right.

Oliver follows Felicity into the bathroom. He shuts the door quietly, shedding the sullied remnants of his arrow suit as he goes. He doesn't pause to care about how bad of a shape it's in, instead tossing it and his undershirt onto the floor. He loses his boots and pants - really, loses all chances of her catching any Slade remnants again - before going to her.

Felicity retches into the toilet, her entire body heaving. Oliver crouches on the floor next to her, pulling the loose strands of her hair away from her face. She jolts, groaning miserably, and he smoothes the rest away from her forehead, sliding his other hand up her back.

"Oliver," she gasps, covering her mouth and looking back at him. "I'm not sure I can…"

"I've got you," he interrupts, tracing circles across the span between her shoulderblades. "And I even ditched the clothes."

She lets out a short laugh. "Well," she starts, eyes skimming down his nearly-naked form. "I do generally prefer- *Oh God*…"

Her own heaving cuts her off and then her face is back in the toilet bowl. Oliver feels more than a little helpless. There's not much he can do beyond rub her back, whispering soothing words and noises. It's something he should probably get used to. It's not like there's much he can do to alleviate the symptoms of pregnancy.

When Felicity finally sits back on her heels, she practically falls against him. Her weight emphasizes his injuries, but there isn't a power in the world that would stop him from being there for her. Oliver instantly wraps her in his arms, holding her up.

He feels more like he's sharing her burden. He's so intensely grateful for that; he *wants* it more than he might have thought he would. He's never been the kind of man someone relies on, not like this, not on a

personal front - at least not consistently - but he craves that now, to be able to offer that kind of support and stability for her, for their children, their family. This is just a small piece of that, of course, but the way she instinctively leans against the hard wall of his chest, knowing he literally has her back… Well, it feels like they're walking the path he wants them to be on, despite the admittedly gross context of this particular moment.

Oliver strokes his fingers across her sweaty brow, pressing a kiss to her heated temple.

"This can't be morning sickness," Felicity groans. "It's not even morning."

He grins. "Pretty sure that's not how it works, honey."

She grumbles out a whimper before shaking her head. "No, no, it'd better be," she says, her voice sharp. "Otherwise that's some serious false advertising."

Oliver chuckles, kissing the top of her head, engulfing her entirely in the safety of his embrace. As they sit there, his arms around her, it becomes clear that this is more for him than for her. He just needs this. After everything they've been through, after what she'd just told him… he needs to hold her. To feel *present.*

And part of being present means having answers, which he doesn't.

It dawns on him that he and Digg will be having kids a few months apart, and that their wives will have each other through this experience - no, not wives, girlfriends. Their *girlfriends*… for now. Regardless of the title, it's an exciting notion. And with Lyla barely working at ARGUS right now, Oliver has to think they might very well spend more time together, become a lot closer than they might have otherwise.

That only leads him down the path of wondering what things were like in Ellie's time. Had he battled Slade? Had Queen Consolidated fallen? Had it taken Lyla's career with it? There's no way of knowing, especially now that things aren't at all what they thought they were - particularly in regards to Ellie herself, something that still makes his heart sink with unease. The glimpses his daughter has given him tell him that things are different though. It's almost like they have to be at this point.

"Why don't you ask Lyla about it?" he suggests.

Felicity grunts her agreement. "I think I will." She makes a face. "But maybe I'll brush my teeth first."

Oliver hums. "That's a really great idea."

She weakly slaps his arm, making him chuckle, before she pauses. Felicity looks up at the sink and frowns. "I'm gonna have to get up to do that though, aren't I?"

"Probably," Oliver agrees, following her gaze. Neither of them move though. "Especially since this isn't our bathroom and your toothbrush isn't here."

She groans and goes to move, but he doesn't let her go. He's not ready to, not even in the most literal sense of the word.

"Oliver."

"Not yet," he counters. He presses his face into the curve of her neck, pulling her between his legs as one hand drops down to stroke her stomach. She covers his hand, following his movements.

"I'm gross," she says. "I have puke-breath."

"Mmhmm." His lips are still pressed against the skin of her neck, completely undeterred.

"Oliver." She laughs, and the sound is music to his ears. She reaches back, pushing on his shoulder lightly, which actually kind of hurts. "You need to clean up, too, you know. I have puke-breath but, clothed or not, you have…" She shudders. "Mirakuru Slade juice all over you."

He winces at that description. "That's… honey, that's just…" He shudders, releasing her.

"You want a shower now, don't you?"

"I really, really do," Oliver agrees. "Possibly a chemical shower."

"That might not be a bad idea if we had one," Felicity admits. She pulls his hand away from her so she can stand before offering him a hand up to join her. He takes it, but doesn't allow her to bear much weight as he rises to his feet. "I'm gonna go see about a toothbrush. You take a quick shower and let Caitlin look you over. Afterwards. Not in the shower. That's my job. And I *like* my job. It's a *good* job. I worked hard for it and beat out loads of other applicants." A

mischievous glint lights her eye as she says, "And I will happily put in overtime whenever asked."

The promising look on her face is something he plans on enjoying later, but for now it just makes him grin. Oliver kisses her on the forehead.

"Okay," he agrees. "Go brush your teeth. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"You'd better be." She backs away, heading for the door. "Or I'm cutting off the hot water."

That makes him laugh again. And he does hurry. He knows her better than to think she might be kidding.

Even several hours after they returned home, it still doesn't feel *quite* real.

Having Thea back, Slade, Malcolm, Isabel and Blood all out of the picture, Ellie protected by the tachyon detector, it's enough to bring a wary sense of peace that settles across Oliver like a warm blanket after too long in the cold. Trusting that warmth to stick around doesn't feel like the smartest thing to do, but nothing strips it away, and as the day presses on, he finds he's waiting for the other shoe to drop less and less.

Sitting vigil in Thea's room alongside Roy is strange at first. They might have had their moments recently, but it doesn't change the fact that their relationship before had been strained, to say the least. But there's no doubting they're both devoted to Thea. The air between them stays silent, for the most part. Their bodies may be on the mend, but repairing their relationship is on them. Oliver feels a weird responsibility to say something first, but he has no idea where to start.

Thankfully, Roy does it for him.

After the third time Felicity pops in and out of the room - this time with a fistful of advil, the strongest medicine he's willing to take - Roy clears his throat.

"I'm happy for you."

Oliver's so taken by surprise that he doesn't respond immediately. It's an apology as much as it is a statement. Words don't come easily to Roy. That he speaks at all says a lot. And Oliver had known he was sorry for how he'd treated them all when Thea was missing. Roy's the

sort of guy who lashes out when he's scared or hurt, and the mirakuru had only amplified that. He knows the desperation Roy had been living under, he knows it very well.

Still, he isn't really able to do anything other than blink at the younger man in response.

That doesn't matter to Roy, though. He only has eyes for Thea.

Finally, with a tiny smile and nod, Oliver offers him a soft, "Thank you."

Roy slides him a knowing glance. "Glad to see you pulled your head out of your ass."

Oliver raises an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

Roy doesn't skip a beat. "I may have been jacked up on mirakuru, but I wasn't blind." That has a tiny herd of butterflies hitting Oliver's stomach, absurdly enough. He must show it on his face, because Roy shrugs. "I only said something because you suddenly aren't biting my head off all the time. I mean, besides earlier. Actually…" He smirks. "Including earlier. She makes you more tolerable."

"Wow. Thanks, Roy."

A long moment of silence passes, both of them watching the muted television.

Without looking away from it, Oliver says, "You should apologize."

It's not a request so much as a softly-given order. He doesn't elaborate because he doesn't need to - they both know exactly what he means, just as Oliver knows Felicity won't follow up on how Roy had treated her. There's a mostly-unspoken understanding between him and Roy about what had gone down, and Oliver's fine with that. But when it comes to his family… he isn't willing to give an inch and Felicity deserves the words.

Roy just nods without meeting his eyes.

He's good to his word. The next time Felicity comes in, he does apologize, stilted and off-putting as it may be for him. It ends with Felicity making a little cooing noise and her face crumpling in appreciation and pride before she rounds the bed to hug him. Roy throws his free hand up to ward her off with a, "Whoa, hey," but she

isn't deterred. She half-hugs a glowering Roy as she says, "Thea's lucky to have you."

She isn't *just* talking about him apologizing for being an ass, and they all know it.

It makes Roy pause. And then smile. A little.

The day passes along with so much calm that it's almost eerie.

Ellie tries to sneak in and see her aunt so many times that Oliver loses count, but she's unsuccessful, mostly because Oliver is there to shoo her out.

The last time Thea had seen Ellie is etched clearly into Oliver's mind. Ellie seems to be dismissing the experience altogether. Either her resilience is shining through or she's just outright blocking the memory. But neither of those options are something Oliver can do. The way Thea had looked when she'd seen Ellie… rather, *heard* Ellie talk about things that hadn't happened in their time yet… It's something he won't be forgetting anytime soon, nor will he be subjecting Ellie to anything like it again. It'd happened when Thea was in her right mind and it'd been nearly unbearable. Now, with mirakuru and the cure in her system, he's well aware that he needs to be as careful as possible, for both Thea and Ellie's sakes.

His daughter doesn't exactly agree, and even with Moira and Donna keeping an eye on her, Felicity wandering after her and Diggle feeling better enough to have tea with her again, she still manages to find her way in. It's just what she'd been doing when it'd been Felicity laid out like this. The only real difference is that Oliver isn't entirely at his wit's end and feels so much better able to handle it this time.

Still… It's exhausting.

"Don't look at me," Felicity says at one point, when he leaves the room briefly to return the precocious toddler to her mother. "That stubbornness has Oliver Queen written all over it."

He really wishes he could dispute that, but he knows better. And as problematic as her persistence is, it's also awfully endearing. He loves that she cares so deeply, that she's not so easily dissuaded. He can't help but think that these qualities will help her later in life, that the dedication and empathy he sees in her now are the foundation for who she'll become. But for now, she's three and she needs to listen to her parents, as much as she might dislike the notion.

When Oliver wanders back into the room, he finds Roy has slid onto the bed with Thea. He's curled up on his side, facing her, his head pillowed on his arm. His hand covers her arm, like he needs the constant contact, and he's fast asleep.

Oliver completely understands that need. He'd *barely* left Felicity's side when she'd been unconscious, and the only reason he ever had was because of Ellie and the near-violent need to find Thea. It was because of his daughter that he even remembered to eat, much less drink some water. Although he'd still done very little of both, despite how much energy he expended nearly every night scouring Starling City.

It occurs to Oliver that the only thing the kid's eaten since they'd brought Thea home was half an apple.

He damn well isn't going to let Roy do the same thing to himself that he had.

Oliver makes his way over to Roy's side. His eyes linger on Thea before skipping over to all the machines she's hooked up to. Her heartbeat is strong, and it's only getting stronger with each passing hour. Which is good. And hopefully means she'll be waking soon. He keeps wanting to ask Caitlin how long it took Roy to wake up after the cure. He'd been there, he feels like he should know, but when he looks back at the last week, it's all a blur.

"Roy," he says softly, shaking his shoulder. The other man grumbles, his face scrunching up with irritation. He tries to move away, but Oliver doesn't let him. "Hey, wake up."

"What?" Roy grouches, his voice groggy. Oliver realizes this is the first time he's actually slept in a while. He almost feels guilty before remembering he needs to eat too. He shakes Roy again, who tries to swat at Oliver's hand. He moves at the last second and Roy ends up smacking himself. That wakes him up more and he pushes himself up, jostling the bed as he turns to glare at Oliver. "What the hell do you want?"

"Go eat," Oliver replies, nodding his head towards the door. "I'll watch her for a while."

"I'm not hungry," Roy says, moving to lay back down. Oliver doesn't let him. He grabs the sleeve of Roy's sweatshirt and pulls him back up before his head can find his arm pillow again. "*Oliver*-"

"You need to eat, Roy," Oliver says before he can get another word in.

"She's going to need you at your best when she wakes up, not passing out from near starvation. She's going to lean on you, and you need strength for that." He pulls on his sleeve harder, forcing Roy off the bed. He can see Roy wants to fight him by the way he grits his teeth. But he doesn't, because of Thea. Instead, he settles for a glare when he finds his feet, yanking on his sweatshirt with an exaggerated movement that looks as ridiculous as Oliver's sure it feels. Oliver nods to the door. "Go. I've got her."

Roy's eyes narrow, but when he takes a deep breath, he catches the smell of Raisa's pot roast. His stomach growls, giving him away completely and emphasizing Oliver's point. So he settles for yet another glare. "Why didn't you just bring me some?" he asks Oliver.

"Because last time I checked I'm not your maid and you have two feet all your own," Oliver responds dryly. "Now go. And when you get back, maybe clean up your gear." He nods at Roy's suit, his bow, his quiver full of arrows tossed haphazardly into the corner.

Roy rolls his eyes but he does turn. He looks back, his eyes lingering on Thea. It's clear he doesn't want to leave. "I'll bring some food back up," he says as he moves to the door. Reluctantly.

"No," Oliver says, shaking his head. "Not only because my mother would kill you and you probably want to at least *try* to stay in her good graces, but because you need a break." It's not entirely true. Oliver's pretty sure his mother wouldn't mind completely, given the circumstances, but the point stands. The guy needs a break. "I've got her, Roy. She'll be here when you get back."

Roy grumbles under his breath, something Oliver doesn't catch, but he does go, with one more glance at Thea.

The open affection on his face is still a little startling - Roy's never been one for showing what he's feeling, and he doesn't even bother trying to talk about it. At least not with Oliver or the team. But with Thea… seeing the look on his face and the devotion he's shown over the last day, it's clear to see that whatever they share is very real.

He'd sent Roy away to protect Thea *from* Roy. He never would have guessed that it was them being together that was the key to keeping the danger at bay.

Oliver turns back to his sister.

Soft, deep breaths have her chest rising ever so slightly. There's color

in her cheeks, and the circles under her eyes aren't as dark as they had been when they'd first brought her home. Her heartbeat is strong and steady. She's getting better. The cure made her better. But the only evidence he sees is physical. He has no idea what she'll be like when she wakes up and his fear has nothing to do with the mirakuru-fueled rage he'd witnessed. No, it has everything to do with the last time they'd talked - *before* the mirakuru - and the things she'd said to him, when he'd told her he was the Arrow. When she'd seen Ellie.

Anxious fear fills his chest and he takes an unsteady breath. One step at a time. How many times has he told himself that over the last day? How many more times is he going to before she wakes?

How many times after?

Oliver would be lying to himself if he hadn't spent the last several hours silently bracing himself for his sister waking up and looking at him with the same distrust and anger and hurt in her eyes. It doesn't work. He knows if that is the case, it will be just as brutal as it was the first time.

"Hey, Thea," he whispers, making his way around the bed to her side. He's made a point of talking whenever it's just them. She isn't in a coma, but he wants her to know that he's there, that she's safe, that he will be her anchor to come back to if she needs him to be. Him and Roy. Oliver snorts under his breath - if anyone had told him he would be thinking '*him and Roy*' when it came to his sister a few weeks ago, he would have simply shaken his head. Because it was *Roy*. And yet… Oliver sighs, leaning over her, taking her hand. "You sure know how to pick 'em."

No response, not that he'd been expecting one.

He finds the chair he'd been occupying most of the day and tugs it closer, sitting down. He never once lets go of her hand.

Oliver continues to talk, about anything and everything that comes to his mind. It's mostly about Roy and their mom, but then he goes into Felicity… and Ellie. There's a lot to say, and most of it is surface stuff, stuff he knows he'll tell her again. He doesn't talk about Malcolm or Slade, and he saves the apologies and explanations for when she's awake.

Minutes pass, the only sounds his voice and the steady beeping of the heart monitor. The sun sets outside, but the lamps in her room maintain the warm glow, her dulled skin reflecting the images on the

muted television.

Roy heeds his request and he stays away, hopefully getting some sustenance. It probably helps that Oliver employed Felicity's assistance. She'd been a force to be reckoned with before, but now that she has a month of mothering a three-year-old under her belt and another child growing inside her? Well, when she says to do something, you should probably do it.

He smirks at the thought of her chastising Roy until he sits down and eats. The mental image of Roy shoveling food in his mouth as he glowers at Felicity, her smiling brightly in return, has him chuckling.

"It works," he says absently to Thea. "In a weird way, it works really well. I can't wait for you to wake up to see it." He pauses. "I know it won't be easy, but if…" Oliver stares at her. "Please come back to me."

One of her lids twitches, barely, and he wonders if he's seeing things.

Oliver brushes her hair off her forehead, pushing the wild strands behind her ear. There's still some sweat-dried dirt along her hairline, and her skin's a little sticky.

"Hang on," he says, squeezing her hand once. He goes to the bathroom, grabbing a washcloth. Running it under the water, he wrings it out and snaps the light off again, before heading back out. He glances around. Nothing's amiss. Oliver sits back down, pressing the warm compress to Thea's forehead. He cleans her face, rambling absently about knowing how dirty airplane hangars are before going into just how he knows that. "The first one I was ever in was in Russia. Half the roof was missing and…"

Something rustles.

Oliver freezes, instantly sitting up. His eyes snap over Thea, wondering if she'd been moving, but she's as still as ever. He glances at the open door, but he doesn't see anything.

"Great," he says. "Now I'm hearing…"

Another rustle. This time Oliver's paying attention and he's up on his feet, tossing the washcloth onto the nightstand before rounding the bed…

Just in time to see Ellie's feet as she tries to push herself under the bed.

"Ellie," Oliver says with just enough snap in it to make her try to scramble further in. He grabs her feet before she can get very far though. She lets out a startled squeak, one he instantly shushes as he pulls her out. She turns onto her back the instant she's out and moves to put her hands up - like she has a chance of warding Oliver off - but he swoops in, hauling her up. The movement has a vicious twinge pulling in his neck, one he feels all the way through his back. He grits his teeth, breathing through it as he asks, "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to be with Aunt Thea," she replies, trying to turn in his arms to see her aunt. But Oliver's already moving to the door. "Daddy, no, I wanna stay!"

"Shh," he says again, hiking her closer. "I said no more sneaking in, Ellie. Didn't I?"

"Well…" Ellie hesitates, because he's got her, but she's nothing if not resilient. "But you won't let me help, and I wanna help! I'm a good helper, Daddy."

"I know you are, Ellie-bug."

"And I did stay downstairs, I stayed with my Grammas and I drew them pictures and I showed them where the fairies live." Oliver nods, even though she'd already told him all about it at dinner. "I've been good, Daddy. I *have*. I'm a good girl!"

Oliver sighs, pausing at the door, looking at her. She's staring over his shoulder, at Thea. He grips her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I thought you were getting ready for bed."

Guilt colors her face for a split second before she pushes it away. She's sneaky, his daughter, a master manipulator. Especially when she purses her lip, looking up at him through her eyelashes.

"Ellie…"

"I just… I wanted to see Aunt Thea. I wanted to brush her hair."

Oliver raises an eyebrow, a soft smile tugging at his lips. "Brush her hair?"

Ellie nods. She slips her fingers into the collar of his shirt, her eyes slipping down to follow their path as she tugs on it. "She lets me do it when I go over to hers and Uncle Roy's house."

"She's still sleeping, baby," Oliver replies.

"I know," she says. She presses her lips together, concentrating on the collar of his shirt. "But Aunt Thea likes when her hair's pretty." She meets his eye again. "And she says I make it the prettiest of *all time*."

Oliver sighs. She is playing the hell out of him. And his reasons for wanting to keep her away from Thea are just as valid as they had been before… but he still feels himself giving in. A few minutes won't hurt, and if brushing her aunt's hair is enough to placate her and get her into bed - at least until tomorrow when it starts all over again - then…

Sometimes you have to pick your battles.

"Okay," he says. Her eyes brighten and she straightens, nearly ready to leap out of his arms. He tightens them though. He's suddenly very aware of the ache in his muscles. His lungs clench with pain as he says, "But we're gonna be very quiet, okay? Because she needs her rest. And I'm going to help."

Ellie nods. "Okay, Daddy. I'll be really, really quiet. Promise." She wiggles. "Imma get her brush!"

With a smile, he nods. "Okay, Ellie-bug." He moves to set her down, but he takes his time, adding "Very quiet, remember."

"Very quiet," Ellie repeats. And she stays true to her word. The second her feet touch the ground, she pauses, looking at Thea, before making her way to the bathroom. She practically tiptoes, an exaggerated move that Oliver almost thinks she does for his benefit, but the way she looks at Thea the entire time tells him she's doing it to be as quiet as possible. It's absurdly adorable.

Felicity doesn't have to be there for him to hear her, "*You are such a pushover, Oliver Queen."*

He is, he absolutely is. But only for his girls.

Oliver makes his way over to the bed just as Ellie appears again with Thea's comb. How in the world she knew where to look for it is beyond him. It's the same one Thea's had since she was ten years old, an heirloom made of ivory with silver-plating that their grandmother had passed on. It brings out an odd feeling of nostalgia in him and for a quick second tears burn his eyes, before he blinks them away. The thought of his daughter using that on her aunt's hair weighs heavy in his chest.

He scoots the chair closer to the bed before hoisting Ellie up into his lap.

They work together, Oliver leaning over, keeping her balanced and making sure she doesn't brush too hard or accidentally stab Thea. It turns out that she really does know exactly what she's doing - she's overly cautious and gentle, taking her time, careful not to scrape over any exposed skin too hard - which tells Oliver that she *does* spend time at Thea's brushing her hair. Thankfully the comb she's using is wide-toothed and easy to navigate, avoiding getting tangled all on its own.

Emotion clogs his throat as he watches his daughter work. At some point she starts humming under her breath, singing something he can't quite hear or follow, but it carries her along as she works. Oliver doesn't let her climb on the bed to get to the other side, but he does hold her so she can reach it.

"No more tangles, Aunt Thea," Ellie says, and it's so clearly just for her aunt's ears that Oliver almost feels like an intruder. All the more reason to *ease* into this, into Thea meeting Ellie again, into her hopefully understanding everything that's transpired. He doesn't want her to miss this. He doesn't want *either of them* to miss this. But he also has to make sure it's done right.

A shuffle of feet outside the door has Oliver turning to find that Roy's back.

The younger man pauses, his eyes latching instantly latching onto Ellie. He hesitates, half-turning, like he'll come back. It's been his signature move around Ellie since he lost his temper that morning.

"Hey," Oliver says.

Ellie looks back to see who he's talking to. She sits up with Oliver's help, smiling at Roy before pointing at Thea. "I'm brushing Aunt Thea's hair just like she likes. Right, Uncle Roy?"

Yeah, *that* still completely throws Roy for a loop. The first time she said hi to him earlier this afternoon, someone could have pushed Roy and he would have fallen over with how frozen he'd been, his eyes glued on Ellie. His reaction is much the same now, although he recovers quicker.

"Uh, yeah," Roy replies, taking a few steps in. He shoves his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, his eyes darting to Oliver and then Thea before finding Ellie again. He nods, a little uncertainly - he gets that

Ellie is from some point in the future and he's heard that he and Thea are together and babysit them, but it's still a lot to wrap his head around. "Yeah, sure."

As if she knows that's all she's going to get from him, Ellie turns back to the task at hand.

Oliver offers him a smile, but Roy just watches Ellie combing through Thea's hair. He takes a few steps closer, but he doesn't sit down. Almost like he feels like an intruder, too. Oliver's glad it's not just him.

It takes Roy a full minute before he clears his throat. "Hey, uh… kid."

Oliver almost rolls his eyes, about to correct him that his child does not - and will not - respond to "kid," but Ellie looks back at Roy with open, curious eyes. Like Roy calls her that all the time. That almost makes Oliver roll his eyes again, and he would, save for the look on Roy's face.

He's hesitant, and nervous as hell.

Roy clears his throat again. "Sorry I was a jerk earlier."

Oliver bites his tongue to keep his chuckle in, settling for smiling at Roy and shaking his head slightly. He knows Roy means well, but he also feels the need to remind him he's talking to a toddler.

"It's okay, Uncle Roy," she tells him. "You were grumpy and worried about Aunt Thea. Daddy was worried, too." She lowers her voice in what's supposed to be a whisper. "He was grumpy, too."

Roy cracks a grin at that.

Oliver nudges Ellie with a playful, "I don't get grumpy."

With a little giggle, she replies, "You do too, Daddy." Looking back at Roy, she sobers, adding, "He was really sad when Momma was sick, remember? He had Sad Eyes, and Sad Eyes make him grumpy. And that's why you were grumpy, so it's okay, Uncle Roy."

Wonder washes through Oliver. It never ceases to amaze him how *aware* she is. No, not just aware, perceptive. That level of understanding with her parents would make sense, but that she can read Thea and Roy that well, too? She's remarkable.

He shares a look with Roy, one of understanding. They wouldn't have

been capable of it of a few weeks before.

As Ellie goes back to brushing Thea's hair - it's really *re*-brushing at this point - Oliver says, "We'll watch her for a little while longer, if you want to catch a shower or something."

"What, do I stink?" Roy asked.

"A little bit," Oliver deadpans.

"Haha," Roy replies. But he doesn't come any closer to the bed, and when his eyes dart to Ellie, it's clear he's still not entirely comfortable. Or maybe he wants the room to himself. But that's something Oliver's not ready to give up just yet. He glances at the television before looking back at Oliver with a nod. "Okay, yeah. I'll just…" He points to Thea's bathroom. "I'll be fast."

When he shuts the door, Ellie says, "He got a really big owie from someone mean once and Aunt Thea was really, *really* grumpy when that happened."

Oliver furrows his brow at the back of his daughter's head. It occurs to him not for the first time that a lot of Ellie's stories from the future involve a lot of injuries. And yet she's still so incredibly stable. "Oh yeah?" he asks.

"Mmhmm," Ellie replies, but she doesn't elaborate. Instead she sits back with a definitive nod. "All done. Look, Daddy…" She slides back and Oliver catches her easily, settling back in the chair with her in his lap. "Her hair's really shiny."

"Yes, it is," Oliver agrees, kissing the side of her head. "You did a great job, Ellie-bug."

His daughter *preens*.

Oliver smiles back before wrapping his arms around her to keep her still as he lifts his legs up, crossing them at the ankle before resting them on the bed next to Thea's legs. Ellie settles back against Oliver's chest, her little fingers running along the teeth of the comb as her eyes find the television. Before she can fully comprehend the movie on the screen - anything with guns and explosions and Bruce Willis is probably something his daughter absolutely does not need to be watching - Oliver grabs the remote and changes the channel to something more kid-friendly.

As Ellie's eyes widen with interest, he finally notices her hair. It's not tangled or ratty, but the loose blond curls are wild as always, and just about everywhere.

"Hey, Ellie-bug," Oliver says, holding his hand out. "Can I brush your hair now?"

"Okay," she replies easily, handing him the comb. She sits up, repositioning herself so she's still perched in his lap, still facing the TV, but so he can access her hair. It's effortless on her part, easy - like maybe they do this a lot.

He's brushed Ellie's hair a few times since she came into their lives in this time, but never at a leisurely pace. He's always been rushed, in some fashion, either they're due to go somewhere or Ellie's too full of energy to sit in one spot for longer than five seconds. So Oliver takes his time, enjoying the hell out of it. He separates Ellie's hair out into sections, brushing through each of them thoroughly. The comb is perfect for her unruly curls, taming them, turning them into shiny rolling masses of blonde, shiny enough to match Thea's.

Ellie's head moves gently, leaning into his hand when he catches a tangle, but she doesn't complain. She just watches TV, perfectly content to be there at her Aunt Thea's side and in her father's lap.

Which is good, because there's no other place he'd rather they be.

As if summoned, the only thing that could possibly make it better appears in the doorway.

Oliver glances over in time to see the beatific smile that cross Felicity's face at the sight they must make.

"Hey," he says, his voice softening.

"Hey," she replies, stepping in. His hands pause as he takes her in, his eyes dancing down her form. He can tell she's tired, read the exhaustion in her limbs, but she is walking better than earlier. Still… Felicity puts a hand up to stop him. "No lectures from you, I was running around looking for this little thing." As she reaches them, she tickles the side of Ellie's neck. The toddler giggles and veers away, forcing Oliver to grab her so she doesn't fall off his lap. His heart warms at the realization that Ellie just *knows* he's going to be there to catch her. Felicity steps up behind him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "This is, of course, the last place I looked because I thought…"

"Yeah," Oliver interrupts sheepishly. "She got me."

Felicity snorts before curling around him, kissing the top of his head.

Oliver closes his eyes with a soft sigh, leaning back. Contentment settles deep in his bones. They haven't really had a chance for just *them* yet, not since everything that happened that morning with Slade. If he wasn't in here with Thea, he was somewhere else in the manor, usually doing something involving Ellie. The yearning for it is definitely there. He wants to crawl into bed with her and wrap himself around her, never letting go. He wants to sleep for a full day, with his girls, cocooning them in his arms, Ellie safe between them…

For a moment, they take their *them* time. Felicity leans into him, resting her cheek on the top of his head. He accepts her weight gladly. Keeping one arm wrapped around Ellie, he wraps his other behind him, finding the back of her thigh. He rubs her there, squeezing her leg gently. The evidence of the fight from that morning pulls at his muscles, but it's so easy to ignore.

Because this is perfection.

Home.

Not opening his eyes, Oliver asks, "Any more morning sickness?"

She hums, shaking her head against him. "No. Thank God. Although there isn't any disgusting Slade goo to make me want to vomit, so that's good. Hopefully that was a one-time thing and I never have morning sickness ever again."

Oliver chuckles, pushing his hand up higher on her leg. "I'm all for that denial." His fingers graze the underside of her bottom, making her twitch and huff out a tiny breath into his hair. "Although I don't think that's gonna happen."

"Let me dream, Oliver," she says, her voice dragging slightly, giving away just how much toll the day's taken on her.

He chuckles again before patting her leg. "Why don't you go lay down? I'll bring Ellie in when Roy's out of the shower."

"Okay," Felicity replies, but she doesn't budge. Instead, she leans over Oliver's shoulder, aiming to tickle Ellie again, but she doesn't get the chance.

A sharp spike in the heart rate monitor sounds and then…

"Hey," Thea croaks from the bed.

Oliver's heart grinds to a halt. He spins so fast to face the bed he feels that twinge in his neck again, but he doesn't care because Thea's awake. Equal parts joy and terror clash together in his chest as his entire world narrows in on the bed, on his sister.

The rage he'd come to associate with her in the last few days is completely gone, replaced with confusion and a little tinge of fear as she shifts on the bed, blinking at her surroundings before focusing on him.

She's awake. She's *okay*.

"Thea," he breathes. Some part of him tells his limbs to move, to get up and go to her, but shock has him frozen. Shock and his own brand of fear. Like if he moves, if he does anything adverse to her, the world will revert back to what it was and he'll wake up somewhere else, in a strange, ugly world where his sister really is gone, where he did fail her.

But then her face scrunches up, like she's in pain. "Ollie?"

The sound of his name on her lips is like a splash of cold water against his face - *she's okay, everything's okay* - and he snaps into action.

Oliver grabs a suddenly silent Ellie off his lap. In one movement he sets her down on the floor and is up, moving to sit on the bed. Thea lifts her arm, moving to touch her face, but the IV stuck in her hand hinders her. She frowns at it, not liking what she's seeing. Oliver grabs both of her hands before she can try to rip the IV out, squeezing them gently.

Thea's eyes fly up to his, her brow furrowing.

It's just confusion staring back at him, and he's never been so grateful in his entire life. None of the anger from earlier clouds her face, none of the hatred or vitriol. Although… if she's confused, looking like she doesn't understand what's happening…

Oliver vaguely remembers Roy describing to Caitlin what he remembered from when he'd lost himself in a mirakuru rage - it's like a black hole, little bits and pieces coming back, sometimes altogether and sometimes not at all.

It's painfully evident she doesn't remember everything that's happened.

He closes his eyes.

Later.

For now, it's enough that she's awake and she's seemingly alright.

"What…?" Thea starts.

"Hey, hey, you're okay," he says softly. She squeezes his hands, weakly, and it's the best feeling in the entire world. He lets out a relieved breath. "You're okay."

"What happened?"

That is a loaded question, and one he has no idea how to answer.

"What do you remember?" he asks instead.

For a quick second, it's obvious she doesn't have an answer. She stares at him, looking so lost, but then she closes her eyes with a grimace. Thea's face crumples as she concentrates, searching her mind… She shakes her head, her words coming out in halted hoarse whispers as she says, "Not much. Why can't I… remember anything? It's like this… vacuum in my head, I don't…"

"It's okay…"

"I was… somewhere dark?" she continues, talking over him. A sharp pain hits in him in the chest and it has absolutely nothing to do with his physical injuries as he watches her remember the weeks she was missing. The weeks he didn't even *know* she was missing. "I remember… salt. The air was salty. And then…"

Her eyes snap open, finding his before they flicker to something over his shoulder.

Oliver knows exactly what she's looking at.

He turns, following her gaze to Felicity and Ellie. His daughter stands in front of her mother, her back pressed against Felicity's legs, her lower lip stuck between her teeth as she watches her aunt. Felicity is bent over, her hands splayed over Ellie's chest, partially to keep her there and to give the suddenly anxious toddler some comfort. And her anxiety is so clear. Oliver can't blame her - she's all gusto and action

when Thea's asleep, but now that she's awake, the last time she saw her aunt is probably very present in her mind.

When Thea doesn't do anything, though, relief and curiosity floods Ellie's face and she visibly relaxes. She moves to step forward, but Felicity stops her with a quiet, "Hang on, sweetie."

Felicity's eyes dart to his, the question clear in them: *should we go?*

Oliver doesn't get the chance to respond as Thea whispers, "Ollie…" behind him, but before she can say anything else, the dryness in her throat gets the better of her. She coughs, and it turns into an ugly hacking noise that sounds like she's trying to heave up her lungs.

"Easy," he says, turning to grab her some water, but there isn't any on the nightstand. He whips back to look at Felicity, the question, "Can you…?"

She's already nodding, saying, "We'll go get some water." He can hear her relief at having something to do, something that doesn't involve standing there, waiting to see what Thea's second reaction to this whole new side of Oliver will be. Felicity leans down and grabs Ellie's hand, whispering in her ear, "Come on, Ellie-bug, let's go get some water for your aunt." It's just loud enough for Ellie - obviously so Thea can't hear - but Oliver still catches it.

Thea's coughing starts to abate, but Oliver can hear how dry her throat is in the way she's breathing. He's about to turn back to her when Ellie shakes her head. Her little eyes never leave Thea as she tries to tug her hand out of Felicity's.

"I wanna stay," she protests.

Felicity purses her lips. Oliver can see she wants to haul Ellie up and take her out, whether she wants it or not, but she clearly doesn't trust her own strength right now. "We'll come back in a bit, okay? She just woke up."

"No, Momma…"

"Ellie," Felicity says, talking over her, voice low but sharp. The little girl's jaw snaps shut, her eyes flying up to her mother. The tentative look on her face slowly morphs into a stubborn line that has Felicity sighing.

Before she can say anything though, Oliver says, "Ellie," in a deep,

hard voice that leaves no room for argument. "You need to listen. Go get some water for your… for Thea. Please."

"But, Daddy…"

"*Now*, Ellie."

Her brow furrows with displeasure and Oliver's suddenly back to the week when Felicity had been in their bed, unconscious, barely surviving. She's giving him the same look as she had then - she doesn't like not being included, she doesn't like missing things.

Tough.

Without another word, Ellie turns. She drops Felicity's hand and this time her mother lets her, turning to watch the little girl stomp out of the room with drooped shoulders and her eyes fixed on the floor in front of her before facing Oliver and Thea again with a wounded gaze.

"I guess I'll go deal with that bundle of fun," Felicity says, pointing over her shoulder towards the door, "and leave you two to… do…" She waves her hands between them. "This. Talk. Okay, I'm… I'll bring water. I'll go get some water, because you have to be parched. I so get that, I was…" Felicity makes a face, pointing at her own throat, even though Thea has absolutely no context for what she's referring to. She's nervous, not that Oliver can blame her. The last time she saw Thea in her right mind, she hadn't been very receptive, not just to Oliver and the idea of his being the Arrow and having a child, but seemingly to Felicity herself. Which Oliver knows isn't true. Felicity takes a step back, but then she stops, and the nervousness melts into real genuine concern, a sight that makes Oliver love her all the more as she says to Thea, "I'm glad you're awake. And that you're okay."

Thea doesn't respond. She just blinks at Felicity, who takes that as her cue and turns. She spares Oliver a quick glance, almost apologizing that she's leaving him alone in there, before taking off after their daughter.

Leaving the Queen siblings alone.

"Ellie," Thea repeats.

Oliver's heart skips a beat and he turns back to his sister. Her eyes are still on the doorway, and instead of responding, he takes a moment to look her over. Her eyes are dry, bloodshot. The cure is still working its way through her body, trying to eradicate the damage the mirakuru's

done, and it's taking its toll. Her voice is ragged and harsh, and it matches the lines of exhaustion etched across her face. Despite that though, she looks a thousand times better than she had before, before the cure, before Slade, before *everything*.

She looks like *Thea*.

And instead of the vicious anger that he remembers very well from Verdant when she'd first seen Ellie, Oliver sees something that looks like wonder on his sister's face. It's tinged with sadness and confusion, but still…

Wonder.

Because she's an aunt. Because Ellie's her niece.

"She's from the future," Oliver says without thinking.

Thea's eyes snap back to his with a frown. "What?"

It doesn't escape his attention that she doesn't pull her hands away.

"Ellie isn't from this time," he explains, knowing full well how ridiculous he sounds, especially since this is really not the kind of conversation to be having a bare few minutes after she's woken up after a truly horrendous couple of weeks… But it is the right time. Because she needs to know. And maybe he's being selfish in needing her to recognize that he would never hide something like this from her, but he doesn't care. Thea doesn't respond and Oliver clears his throat, glancing down at her hands where they rest in his. Cuts and bruises litter her delicate skin, a clear indicator the cure is working. "She's from a few years in the future. We're not sure how many, exactly. Seven or eight, we think. It sounds just as crazy as it is." He glances back at her and the look on her face has him chuckling. "I saw it with my own two eyes. She's here, from a few years in the future. My daughter."

"Wow, that is…" Thea lets out a sardonic laugh. "That is really not the explanation I was expecting."

"I wouldn't keep something like this from you, Thea," Oliver says. He shakes his head, his eyes dropping down to her hands again. He rubs a thumb over her knuckles. "Not if I could help it. I never wanted to keep anything from you."

"You mean like being The Arrow?"

He freezes, his breath catching in his throat. Some part of him had irrationally hoped that she'd magically forgotten their entire last conversation, but that's asking for too much, and he knows it. He'd known this was going to come up, he'd tried to prepare for it…

She continues before he can gather his thoughts to speak. "I thought I was never going to see you again." Her voice is small, barely there, and so full of fear that it has Oliver's head snapping up to look at her again. Tears fill her eyes as she stares at him. "It wasn't like before, this was different. It *felt* different, when they took me, where they kept me. I was left alone for days, I barely got water or food, and… and I didn't think I'd ever see you again, Ollie. Which…" She laughs, but it's just for the sake of filling the empty space between them. "I was glad for it, the first few days. But then… but then all of it wasn't that… important. Not anymore."

Oliver's voice chokes as he whispers, "Thea."

"I'm so…" She lets go of one of his hands - the other still clasps his - and covers her chest. The agony that covers her face for a split second tears through him and all Oliver wants to do is erase it from her, take it on himself. "I'm so *sad*, Ollie. I'm sad and I don't know why and I'm… something's *missing* and…"

Thea shakes her head, a soft huff of frustration slipping past her lips at her inability to articulate her thoughts. God, she doesn't remember. She doesn't remember the last week, she doesn't remember the mirakuru, what had happened since it'd been injected in her.

Acid burns the back of Oliver's throat and he grits his teeth. He doesn't want her to remember. He doesn't care how selfish it is, how wrong it is, how much she'd hate him for it. So much for not wanting to keep anything from her. If he could spare her those thoughts, those *memories*? He would in a heartbeat. Because he wants that for her. There's no getting around telling her about Malcolm - he *will* - but… but if she can escape without having to remember what it was like being under the control of mirakuru?

Isn't that better?

Yes. It has to be. Because otherwise… he honestly doesn't know.

"I don't know what it is," Thea continues, "or what… what even happened, but I had a lot of time to remember that I'd already lost you once…" Her voice cracks, more tears filling her eyes. "And I didn't want to lose you again, Ollie, I didn't want that."

"You didn't lose me," Oliver whispers, leaning closer. He smiles through his own tears burning his eyes. "I'm right here. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that I didn't tell you, but I… I was trying to protect you. I only wanted to protect you. That's all I've ever wanted. To keep you safe. To protect everyone."

"I'm still upset about it," Thea says, laughing under her breath. "Like *really* upset. That you lied to me, about so much. That *you've* been the crazy guy running around the city putting arrows in people. That you have a kid that I didn't know about… although I guess you have a reason for that. I'm still mad at you, Ollie, but now it's like… I'd rather yell at your face and then sit down and drink hot chocolate with those gross colored marshmallows you like."

Oliver laughs at that, at the memory of the times right before bed when they'd been little, when Robert and Moira were out late, whether it was out of town or at a benefit, and Raisa made them hot chocolate. It's so incredibly random, but so *perfect* at the same time.

Thea wipes her cheeks, rolling her eyes at herself. "I thought about that a lot."

"Yeah?" Oliver asks, wiping his own tears from his face.

"Yeah. It's stupid."

"No." He shakes his head. He takes a short, cleansing breath, letting the moment wash through him. Nothing's really over, or this easy, he knows that. But he's going to enjoy this simple moment while he can. Oliver gives her a soft smile. "It's really not."

He absently remembers that Roy is still in the bathroom, that he could come out at any moment. He's also very aware that Thea can't possibly know he's there, that she might not even be expecting him, that she might really want to yell at Oliver even more if she knew *why* Roy had left in the first place.

God, he almost wants that. He wants Thea there, in his face, instead of running away from him.

Still, Oliver hopes Roy stays in there for hours.

"Is Mom…?"

"She's still here, I think," he replies. "Downstairs."

"And… I'm sorry, what's… What's her name? Felicity?"

The smile that pulls at his lips is completely involuntary and he knows Thea can see it as he answers, "Yes. Felicity."

"You love her," Thea says, seeing right through him as only his sister can.

"I do. I really do."

"I can see it." She stares at him. "I can oddly enough totally see you having a kid now." He chuckles at that, which makes Thea smile. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you," he whispers. A quiet smile spreads across his lips as he realizes there's more to say on that front. Ellie had told just about everyone in their lives about the baby, but not Thea. He gets to have this, gets to tell his sister he's going to be a dad. And the idea of that sends a surge of excitement flooding through his veins. "Actually… it's not just one kid. At least, it won't be in about eight months or so."

Thea's eyes widen, her lips parting in surprise. "Seriously?" she asks. "Like, she's pregnant? You're not expecting another kid to pop back in time and join the current one, right?"

Oliver laughs at that, sharp and loud. "Seriously. There's morning sickness and everything."

"But it's not Ellie?" Thea asks. "You said she's from seven or eight years or so?"

"Yeah, not Ellie," he agrees. "I guess her being here changed a few things. Maybe sped it up. We don't know. But, Thea…" He stares at her, trying to find a way to express what he's feeling. And he wants to, he wants to tell Thea, especially with the way she's looking at him. He wants to share this with her. "I'm not sure I've ever been this happy before. It feels like missing pieces of my life just finally showed up. I can't even explain it."

For a long moment, Thea doesn't say anything. It's not a strained or awkward or bad silence though, it's something else. Something better. Tears fill her eyes again as she nods. She blinks them away before they can go anywhere.

"I'm so glad for you, Ollie," Thea says. "And you're gonna be an awesome dad. Actually, I think maybe you already are."

That's too much of a statement, too big for him to respond to with words. It hits him deep, rocking his foundations in the best way possible. It's such a far cry from the greeting he'd feared he'd get from her when she woke up. Oliver nods, unable to articulate anything. He grabs her hand, looking down at it. Her fingers curl into his palm until she's squeezing him tightly.

"I mean it," she says, so soft it's barely audible.

"Thank you," he says.

With a small nod, Thea relaxes back into her pillow, and it's only then that Oliver realizes how much she'd been moving as she'd talked. She's waking up more fully, more life starting to fill in the tired spots between the lines. It's not physical exhaustion making her fall back, not like it'd been with Felicity. This is all emotional.

"I guess we have a lot to talk about," he says.

Thea snorts. "Yeah. That's sort of an understatement."

Oliver smiles at her, taking a moment to simply *enjoy*. "I'm really glad you're okay, Speedy."

"Me, too." She smiles. "I missed you, big brother."

His voice is uneven as he says, "I missed you, too."

A soft noise pulls their attention to the doorway.

Oliver turns to look over his shoulder to see Felicity leaning around the doorjamb, her face tentative. "Is it okay if we drop off some water?" she asks. The question is loaded with double meaning - '*Is it okay if Ellie comes back in?'*

Before he can answer, Thea nods gently and says, "Yeah."

It's all Ellie needs to hear before she's stepping around her mother and carrying in an almost-full glass of water into the room. Her bottom lip is stuck between her teeth with concentration, her eyes focused on the glass as she makes her way to the bed.

"I was going to bring Moira up with us," Felicity says, following Ellie. "But she had to run to City Hall. That whole being mayor thing is more than a full-time job." She smiles at Thea. "She'll be back in a few hours."

"Mayor?" Thea repeats. "She won?" She pauses, trying to make sense of that bit of information and how that applies to just how much time has passed since she'd seen everyone. It hasn't hit her yet, Oliver realizes, the full magnitude of, well… any of it. Not just that she seems to be really missing time courtesy of the mirakuru, but that she was *kidnapped* and held somewhere for two full weeks. And then the last week… "Wow," she says absently. "Okay. I definitely missed a lot."

Ellie steps in before she can fall too deep down that well, and it's the perfect distraction. Thea's eyes latch onto the toddler as she makes a direct beeline to the nightstand. She carefully places the water down, hissing slightly when some of it sloshes despite her best efforts.

"Thank you," Thea says, her voice gentle.

The smile on his sister's lips is very evident in her voice as she looks at Ellie. She is the complete opposite of the woman he'd encountered in Verdant, and the person he'd met when she'd had mirakuru in her is nowhere to be found.

Now she's all soft edges and smiles as she looks at his daughter.

At her niece.

A grin of pure delight lights up Ellie's face. She bites her lip with excitement this time, her joy to maybe be seeing the aunt she remembers so well taking over, but she stops herself from leaping right at her. Oliver almost compliments her on it right then and there, but he doesn't want to ruin the moment. She glances at Oliver, but Thea's already moving.

She lifts her hand, holding it out to Ellie. "It's nice to meet you, Ellie."

"We already know each other, silly," the little girl replies.

"Ellie," Oliver softly chastises, but Thea just chuckles, nodding.

"I guess we do," she says.

Ellie presses her lips together tightly, staring at Thea, before she looks up at Oliver. Her voice is quiet, meant to be a whisper as she asks, "Can I give her a hug, Daddy?"

Oliver has to bite his lip to keep himself from grinning at the earnest question. "You'll have to ask her, Ellie-bug."

From the corner of his eye, he sees the second Thea recognizes the nickname. She mouths, '*Ellie-bug,'* her eyes finding his. He nods, answering her unspoken question.

Ellie looks at Thea. Her voice is tentative as she asks, "Can I give you a hug, Aunt Thea?"

The tears that fill Thea's eyes are unexpected, but the smile isn't as she nods, opening her arms with a, "Yeah. Okay."

And then Ellie's climbing onto the bed, with Oliver's help, and she gently - to the point of being overly cautious - hugs her aunt. It's feels like a moment weeks in the making and it pulls at something in Oliver's heart with a strength he could not possibly have anticipated, especially when Thea's breath hitches at the feel of the little girl in her arms. It's the same recognition Oliver felt the first time he held her, he's sure of it - she's *family*. She belongs to them.

Thea wraps her arms around Ellie as much as she can. Oliver melts at the sight - he'd needed this for them. He hadn't even known how much.

As Ellie starts talking about brushing her hair and doing it just how she likes, Oliver feels Felicity step up behind him, her hand finding his shoulder. He covers it, threading their fingers together, both of them watching their daughter reconnect with their aunt.

Things aren't perfect just yet, and they won't be for a while, but for right now? They are. They really are.

Ellie settles onto the bed next to her aunt, curling into her. Her soft blonde curls drape over Thea's shoulder as they talk in quietly animated voices, both of them all smiles. For her part, Ellie's seems to be all joy at finally having a sense of familiarity with her aunt. But for Thea, it's entirely wonder, and it only grows with each new word that falls from Ellie's lips. That this little girl has that sort of connection with her seems to astound her. It has a strange nostalgia burning his gut - he'd had the same reaction during those first few days after Ellie had shown up in their lives.

"An' you can be my Vice President," Ellie says with a nod, all seriousness, "when you're all the way better."

Amusement colors Thea's voice as she asks, "Your Vice President?"

Ellie nods. "Of the fairies."

"You don't want your mom or dad to be your Vice President?" Thea asks her.

"No," the toddler says, shaking her head. The movement has her curls fluttering against Thea's neck. "Daddy's the Captain of the Fairy Knights."

"And your mom?"

"Momma's my momma," Ellie replies. "That's a big enough job."

Oliver chuckles at that. He looks back at the woman in question and finds her already staring at him. He stands, pulling her in front of him. Oliver wraps his arms around her, pressing his face into her neck. He kisses her softly, breathing her in, savoring her warm scent as it floods his senses.

Ellie's not wrong. Keeping up with her is a job all its own, a job they'll be doubling up on soon with the new baby. He's sure that should freak him the hell out, but it doesn't. He's excited. He's *so* excited about it. Holding her tight, one of his hands settles low on Felicity's belly. His thumb strokes against her stomach. Gratitude washes over him, so strong it nearly makes his knees buckle.

"It is a big job," Thea agrees, bopping Ellie lightly on the nose. "I guess you do need help running the fairy kingdom."

"Yes," Ellie says before cupping her hands around her mouth like she's about to tell a secret, but what comes out is far from a whisper. "The fairies like you already, Aunt Thea. They said they miss you."

Thea's face quirks in confusion. "Miss me?"

"In their fairy castle in the yard," Ellie tells her. "They said they haven't seen you in *so long*."

Comprehension slowly dawns on Thea's face and her eyes dart up to meet her brother's. "You took her out to the playhouse you and Tommy made me?"

He smiles. "Yeah."

A new understanding passes between the siblings. Even with Thea gone - even before she'd been given mirakuru, when she'd just been angry - he'd made sure that she was part of her niece's life. Even if it was just through a shared treehouse.

Swallowing through the emotion clouding her face, Thea turns to Ellie. "I would love to be your Vice President. Thank you for the offer. How about we-"

The bathroom door opening cuts her off. Oliver silently curses - everything else had disappeared the instant Ellie and Thea had connected. Roy freezes in his tracks when he sees her awake. Oliver's not sure which one is more surprised - Thea to see Roy at all, or Roy to see her conscious.

"Thea," Roy whispers. He takes a stilted step forward, reaching out before clenching his hands into fists. He shoves them into the pockets of his hoodie, like he's trying to keep himself from going to her. Which he probably is. "You're awake."

"You're…" Thea blinks, confusion and a cautious wash of hope coloring her face. "Here."

"Uncle Roy's been here the whole time," Ellie chimes in.

"What?" Thea jerks at that pronouncement, eyes widening as she looks toward Ellie. "That's… Uncle? *Uncle* Roy?" she asks incredulously. Oliver doesn't miss Roy's reaction - his eyes widen, very aware of the magnitude of that proclamation, but he also blushes slightly. As if he likes the idea. Which makes Oliver's head spin slightly.

"Uh huh," Ellie agrees, completely oblivious to the earth-shattering news she'd just dropped on her aunt. "I'm so glad you're awake, Aunt Thea, so everybody can stop having Sad Eyes now. Everybody keeps getting hurt and they need to stop."

She's not wrong. The level of stress and worry they've all been under is utterly exhausting and he, too, is looking forward to a much needed injury-free lull in the near future.

Roy clears his throat. "Can we, uh… Can we have a minute?" he asks. He glances toward Oliver. "Just… there's some things I need to say, and…"

He doesn't need to finish. As much as Oliver doesn't want to leave his sister's side, he will. He's very aware of what kind of terms Roy and Thea left things on and he really doesn't want to be on hand for their reunion. At least, what he hopes is a reunion. It's a new desire he feels for them, especially considering he'd played a part in their breaking up. Something he suddenly finds himself hoping Roy doesn't tell Thea just yet. It's not a secret, there won't be any more secrets between him

and his sister if he can help it, but that's something that's best explained with… well, with an explanation.

Later.

With a nod, Oliver lets go of Felicity and steps forward to pick up Ellie.

"It's her bedtime anyhow," Felicity says, something that makes Ellie pout in an exaggerated fashion.

Thea shifts, sitting up a little more, going to help put Ellie into her father's arms, but she stops mid-movement. She sways, groaning under her breath, her face twisting. She puts her hand to her head, shuddering like she's walked into a wall of cobwebs. Her reaction looks instinctive, not a conscious move, and it has Oliver grabbing Ellie a little more swiftly, cradling her against his chest.

His brow furrows with worry as he asks Thea, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she says. "I think so." Thea shakes her head again, blinking harder. "I just… I don't know. It felt weird for a minute. But it's…" She looks down at her hands before looking back at him. "I'm fine now."

"It takes time," Roy says, stepping closer. "The cure. It'll hit you in weird moments for a while. It's not… it doesn't make everything go away, and it doesn't help all at once."

Thea's gaze turns to Roy. He's in a unique position to help Thea with this. He's been where she is, knows what she's going through. The look they share is something that Oliver definitely doesn't need to be there for.

"We're going to go get Ellie to bed," Oliver says, "and then grab Caitlin. She'll want to look you over."

Thea blinks. "Caitlin?"

"Doctor friend of Felicity's," Roy supplies. "She's been looking after all of us."

"We should call your mom, too," Felicity says, sliding her hand down Oliver's arm until it cups his elbow. "She'll want to know Thea's awake."

"Yeah," Oliver agrees. "Okay." He hoists the toddler up higher in his

arms. "Say goodnight, Ellie-bug."

Ellie grins widely. "Goodnight, Ellie-bug," she says before laughing at her own joke.

Oliver chuckles. "You think you're so funny, don't you?" he asks, tickling her side, making her scream in delight.

"Daddy, stop… stop!" she yelps through her giggles as he turns, taking a step to the door. When she realizes where they're going, she switches gears. "Wait, Daddy! I gotta kiss Aunt Thea goodnight."

Ellie's already reaching for Thea and it takes all of Oliver's reflexes and bruised muscles to keep hold of her. He steps back to the bed, holding her parallel to the floor, breathing through the strain on his body as Ellie puckers up and makes kissing noises at her aunt. Thea shakes her head and laughs, pushing herself up to kiss Ellie on the cheek before accepting one from her. She brushes Ellie's curls away from her face.

"Sleep well, Madam President," Thea says.

That has Ellie grinning like mad as she responds with, "You too, Madam Vice President." Oliver pulls her back up into his arms and Ellie turns to him with a nod."Okay, Daddy. *Now* we can do bedtime."

"Oh, okay, now we can," Oliver says, shaking his head at his daughter. He glances at Thea and then Roy. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Roy-"

"I'll keep an eye on her," Roy cuts him off.

None of them miss Thea protesting that she doesn't need anyone to keep an eye on her - she's perfectly fine - but the two men nod in shared understanding anyhow. Oliver leaves the room with Ellie and Felicity, secure in the knowledge that Thea is awake and doing okay and under Roy's watchful eye.

"Can I wear my Doc McStuffins p'jamas?" Ellie asks brightly. "I wanna be a stuffed animal doctor when I grow up. 'Cause I like helping people, like a doctor does, but I *really* like stuffed animals."

"Sure," Felicity agrees. "If they're clean."

"'Kay." Ellie nods. "If they're not, then I wanna wear WordGirl. She's a kid *and* a superhero *and* she's from another planet. That's pretty awesome."

"It definitely is." Felicity smiles at her daughter, ruffling her hair before reaching out for her. "Come here, baby. Your poor Daddy's arms probably hurt after the day he's had."

As much as he doesn't mind the pain, he also wouldn't mind letting Felicity take over for a bit. His body does ache, and it'll be worse tomorrow. He knows that from experience. Advil is really too weak for the kind of injuries he sustained, but it'll have to do since the thought of taking anything stronger makes him cringe.

Ellie shifts easily into Felicity's embrace as the three of them walk down the hall toward their room. Felicity turns the light on, turning to Ellie to ask her where she'd put her clothes, because they definitely aren't in her drawer where they're supposed to be, when a thin trill sounding from downstairs interrupts her.

The doorbell.

Oliver glances at the clock - it's not late enough to be concerned, but it's definitely not early enough to be a casual visit. He hears Raisa downstairs heading to greet whomever is calling. There's enough going on that he wants to check on it himself.

"You okay with her?" he asks Felicity.

She's nodding before the words are even out. "Daddy's gonna see who's at the door," Felicity tells Ellie. "Wanna give him a goodnight kiss?"

"'Night, Daddy," Ellie says, giving him a goodnight kiss, leaning out of Felicity's arms much as she had when it'd been Thea.

Oliver gives her a soft peck and a quiet, "Goodnight, Ellie-bug," before turning to Felicity. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," she replies, leaning up for her own goodnight kiss. Although if he has anything to say about it, they'll be having a few more when he gets back. The kiss is simple, because there's no time for lingering, but it says everything they need it to, as always.

With a little wink, he turns, jogging down the hallway and then the stairs.

Oliver has no idea who to expect when he hits the bottom landing, but when he sees who it is standing in the foyer, to say he's surprised is an understatement.

"Laurel."

"Sara called me," she says by way of greeting. She moves towards him and he takes the rest of the stairs down, meeting her halfway. "She said you found Thea. I'm glad."

"Thank you," he says. "She's not really up for visitors yet, though."

When Laurel doesn't respond right away, that tells him everything he needs to know. She sighs, shifting a handful of file folders and loose papers from one arm to the other.

"This isn't a social call," she says. "Sebastian Blood has one hell of a defense team, and I need to interview Thea…"

"What?" he immediately snaps, trying to cut her off. "Absolutely not."

Laurel talks over him. "... about what happened during those two weeks when she was being held captive by him. We need her statement."

"No, Laurel," Oliver repeats, shaking his head, unable to hide his annoyance that she's even asking. They *just* brought her home. She's barely been awake for all of twenty minutes. And considering what she does remember is next to nothing, the last thing she needs is to be questioned about it. Not now. "She needs to get better. She doesn't remember a lot of it right now."

"Ollie…"

"*No*. I don't want her badgered about an experience she's only partially even aware happened."

"This isn't really a choice, Ollie," Laurel says, raising her voice. Oliver narrows his eyes. "The judge is going to grant Blood bail unless I can get a compelling statement from your sister about his role in her kidnapping. I don't think you want him out on the streets again, do you?"

Oliver grits his teeth. No, of course he doesn't want that, but he also doesn't want Thea to have to face any of this until she's ready to do it on her own terms. And especially tonight, of all nights, when she just woke up, when she just met Ellie and when emotions are probably closer to the higher side than normal.

Not. Today.

Still, as much as he hates it, he knows how this is going to go.

He must not answer fast enough because Laurel sighs. "Ollie… please."

"Fine," he says, a little harsher than intended. He levels her with a look. "But it's up to her. Neither of us are going to force her to talk about it if she says she's not ready." Laurel inhales quickly, moving to argue but he swipes his hand through the air, cutting her off. "If Blood gets out… I'll deal with it however I have to."

As much as the idea of pounding Blood's face in has a dark pleasure unfurling inside him, he really hopes it doesn't come to that. Because he's nowhere near ready to suit up again.

Laurel purses her lips. "I'm going to pretend as the local assistant DA that you meant by upping security around here and leave it at that, okay?"

Instead of playing the part, he ignores the question and turns to go up the stairs. "Come on. Roy's with her right now. She just woke up."

"In her room?" Laurel asks, following him up.

"Yeah."

His aggravation is painfully evident and as they make their way up the stairs, Laurel adds, "I'm sorry I have to do this now, Ollie."

Oliver specifically chooses to not point out that she doesn't *have* to do this now. He gets why she thinks she does, that Blood can very well walk, but she doesn't *have* to do this. And none of it is helped that he knows Laurel won't back down until she's tried everything within her power.

His knee aches as he goes up the stairs, and he feels his aggravation mounting with each step, realizing he could be getting ready for bed with his family. Instead, he's here. And while it might not directly be her fault, he finds it surprisingly easy to put all the frustrations he's been keeping at bay all day on her.

"It's okay," he finally says. "It's just… it's been a very long day."

"I am glad she's okay."

The genuine tone in her voice has him pausing. Oliver offers a tight smile over his shoulder, saying, "Thank you," just as they reach Thea's

room.

Oliver knocks, but he doesn't wait before opening the door.

Thea and Roy's foreheads are pressed together in a quietly intimate moment, one that's clearly meant for just them. Thea looks at Oliver, but Roy turns away. Oliver bites the tip of his tongue. He's going to have to get used to giving them their space.

"Sorry to interrupt," Oliver says.

"It's okay," Thea replies. "You said you'd be coming right back."

"Yeah," he agrees. "I did. It's just…"

"What?" his sister asks. Instead of answering, Oliver opens the door further, letting them see Laurel in the hallway. Thea frowns in confusion. "Laurel?"

"Hi, Thea," she says, stepping into the room.

"You don't have to do this right now," Oliver says, following her in. "If you aren't ready, that's more than…"

"Do what, Ollie?" Thea asks.

The tension in her voice is obvious as her eyes dart between Oliver and Laurel. The sound of it has Roy turning. His eyes dance between them, too, almost accusatory. His eyes are bloodshot from tears, the skin around his eyes strained, and Oliver wishes he'd just turned Laurel away.

"I need to talk to you about Sebastian Blood," Laurel says.

"The hell you do," Roy interjects, standing up, putting himself between Laurel and Thea. He glares at the lawyer, but the look he shoots Oliver could have turned him to ash. "That's not happening."

"Roy," Thea starts, sitting up, putting her hand on his arm.

"No, you *just* woke up," he says, turning to give her a sharp look before turning back to Oliver and Laurel. "She's been through hell and she doesn't even remember half of it. It can wait."

"He's going to be out tomorrow if I don't get something," Laurel responds, advancing a few steps. Oliver's quick to follow, especially when the look Laurel gives Roy is almost challenging before she looks

at Thea. "And I know you don't want that."

Roy clenches his jaw so tight Oliver can see his muscle twitching.

"He…" Thea sits up more fully, but the movement doesn't do anything to back up the lost sound of her voice as she says, "They can't possibly let him go. Not after what he's done. There's… there has to be evidence, right?"

"There is," Laurel agrees. "But it's not enough to deny him bail."

"So he'll just… walk?" Thea asks, the words coming out in stilted breaths. Her breathing speeds up and her face pinches in a pained look. She squeezes her eyes shut before looking down at her hands. They're shaking, uncontrollably, and when she makes a fist, the exertion has her arm trembling. She stares at it like she can't quite believe it's hers.

God, Oliver wishes he'd just turned Laurel away.

"Thea," he says, "you don't have to-"

"I do," she interrupts. She nods, and it's almost manic as she says, "I do and you know it, or you wouldn't have let Laurel up here in the first place."

"Thea," Roy starts, but she cuts him off with a shake of her head.

"I'm doing this," she says. "I have to. If my… if my statement can keep that man behind bars? That man… he told me he could make things better, but he didn't. He kept me locked up, away from my family, away from you. It's… I don't think I'd ever forgive myself for not trying. You have to let me do this, Roy. For me."

"Does it have to be right now?"

"Yes," Laurel says, answering for her.

Roy barely keeps himself from throwing her a hard glare. Instead, he keeps his eyes on Thea. She nods and he sighs, letting go. He nods, once, solid and decisive.

"Thank you," she whispers. She tugs on his arm until he's leaning down and she can kiss him softly. Some of the anger saps right out of him at that and Oliver's left wondering which one of them balances the other one more. It's an amazing thing to see.

The second they part, all that softness disappears and Roy turns to Oliver with a pointed look. "Can I have a word with you outside?"

With a tired sigh, Oliver says, "Yeah," before looking past him at Thea. "We'll be right out here if you need anything. If it's too much, stop. Okay. You are completely in control of this."

Thea snorts. "Sure, Ollie. I'm in control. Got it."

The sarcasm dripping from her words are like a physical punch. It's a dumb thing to say, to a degree, because she hasn't been in control for the last several weeks. But it's also *true*, and he needs her to know it. Oliver wants to say more, wants to reassure her, or somehow just make it all better, but he doesn't know how. So instead he gives Laurel a warning look and heads out the door with Roy hot on his heels.

When Laurel follows them, clearly moving to close the door, Oliver shakes his head with a sharp, "Leave it open."

It's a tone she's not used to from him, and for a split second, she's so startled she just stares at him. But then she nods.

Roy doesn't stop until he's a good ten feet from the door before he spins around. "What the hell was that all about?"

"She deserved to be the one to make the choice, Roy," Oliver replies, keeping his voice as low as possible so it doesn't carry. He runs his hands through his hair, glancing back at the room. "In case you've forgotten, she hasn't been able to do that herself in weeks. I wasn't going to take it away from her now."

"But she just woke up," Roy argues, as if Oliver hadn't spoken at all. "And she doesn't remember it at all yet. When it hits her, it's… It's going to be bad. Okay? And she doesn't need Laurel making it worse. Or asking her questions that make her remember when she isn't ready."

"You think I want that for her, Roy?" Oliver snaps. "It's the last thing I want for her, but it wasn't my choice. It's *hers*, Roy. It's her choice. Not mine. Not yours. Not Laurel's. *Thea's*. You and I might not like it, but she made a decision and we're going to stand by her. She needs that from us."

"Of course I'm standing by her!" Roy says, forcing his voice into a low whisper that comes out in a hoarse shout. "She's my… she's…" He growls under his breath, at the entire situation, at everything, before

saying, "Obviously I'm here. But she shouldn't have had to make that choice in the first place. Not yet."

Oliver sighs. "We agree on that. But I couldn't turn Laurel away without giving Thea the option to talk to her. You *know* that. We have both done more than our fair share making decisions for Thea that we had no business making. So I'm letting her make her own choices."

Roy opens his mouth to respond, but he's cut off by the rapid sound of footsteps running up the stairs. They both turn in time to see Caitlin reaching the top and running towards them down the hallway. She's frazzled, her eyes wide with alarm.

"Hey," Oliver says. "What…?"

"Thea's awake," Caitlin says. "Felicity said she's awake."

"Yeah," Roy answers, confusion twisting his brow. "So?"

"I just got some of her bloodwork back."

A chill runs down Oliver's spine. It's not her words, but the urgency in her tone. Worry and anxiety roll off of her, spreading out to both him and Roy.

"Explain," is the only thing Oliver can choke out.

"It wasn't just mirakuru they dosed her with," Caitlin says. "It was Vertigo, too."

Shock and terror turn Oliver's blood to ice. "What?" he breathes.

"And I don't know how those chemicals will work together with the cure. It might be nothing. It might be fine. Or maybe… I think maybe it could-"

A scream from the bedroom cuts her off.

"No," Oliver gasps. It's coming from Thea's room. *Thea*. Oliver spins, darting for her door. He knows Roy's following him, knows Caitlin is there, too. He hears someone shouting - he'll realize later it was him, shouting his sister's name - but it's nothing compared to the fear pounding a horrifying beat in his ears.

Thea, Thea, Thea…

When he reaches her door…

It takes him far too long to comprehend what he's seeing.

A ragged, "Oh my God," comes from behind him - Caitlin - but that's all background noise because his sister is crouched on the ground, twitching, snarling, jerking like her body's possessed…

And blood.

There's so much blood.

Laying before her, on the ground, is Laurel. A thin stream of blood slips from the corner of her lips as she stares with wide, shocked eyes at the ceiling, gripping one of Roy's arrows where it'd been driven right into her chest.

Chapter 36

The signs are there as they get ready for bed. Ellie's eyes keep trying to slide shut as they brush their teeth, and her idea of a perky smile when she gets her pajamas on is a sleep-drugged grin that looks downright ridiculous because she can't keep her eyes open.

"Come on, sleepyhead," Felicity says with a smile, nudging the little girl towards the bed.

"I'm not a sleepyhead, Momma," Ellie argues.

"Oh no?" Felicity asks, picking her up before she can say anything else. "You're not tired at all?" Ellie shakes her head. Felicity stands her daughter on the bed, holding her hips to keep her from falling over, because she is most definitely tired. "So you're up for running a few marathons then?"

"Yep," Ellie replies.

"Maybe a quick swim across the Atlantic ocean?"

"Imma really good swimmer," the little girl says, the words slurring together, her head lolling forward, like it's too much for her to hold up anymore.

"Yes, you are," Felicity says with a chuckle, kissing her on the cheek. "But you need rest to keep being such a good swimmer, right?"

Ellie narrows her eyes, some part of her recognizing that Felicity's using some sort of logic on her. It's painfully adorable, with her ruddy cheeks and sleep-heavy lids. "I guess."

"Trust me, baby girl," Felicity says, sweeping her off her feet and laying her down. "If you get a full night of rest, you'll be more than ready to run all those marathons and swim all the oceans."

"But…"

A yawn cuts her off. The instant her head hits the pillow, Ellie's eyes shut of their own accord. She's nearly asleep, but she wouldn't be a Queen if she didn't go down without a token fight.

"Imma wait for Daddy," she announces. She ends up drawing out 'Daddy' when another yawn attacks, stretching her mouth so widely

that her jaw makes a little popping noise, her tiny body shuddering with exhaustion.

Felicity might argue that point, but she doesn't need to. Ellie's eyes flutter shut against her will again. She forces them open, but it's obvious she's losing the battle. Ellie curls onto her side, the cape of her WordGirl pyjamas trailing behind her as she blinks sleepily up at her mother, her eyes drooping a little more each time.

Smoothing her curly hair off her forehead, Felicity leans down, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. "How about we wait for him together?" she suggests, scooting onto the bed.

Ellie smiles at that, nodding with a barely audible, "Okay, Momma."

Felicity settles in next to Ellie. She doesn't lie down, mostly because she's afraid she really *would* fall asleep - she's beyond drained - and she wants to be awake when Oliver gets back. But she does lean back against the headboard, stroking Ellie's back as the little girl wraps an arm around her thigh, sighing in total contentedness as she starts to drift away.

"'M glad Sad Eyes are done," Ellie mutters. "An' Aunt Thea's not mad at me."

The sheer guilelessness of her words, the painful amount of innocence in them, makes Felicity's heart clench.

Her daughter's been through so much. *Too much.* She wants nothing more than to erase the darker parts of her baby's experiences, to make it all joyful and positive. That's not the kind of life they'll ever be able to give her, though. It's always going to be like this, moments of perfection tinged by brutality and trauma, because this is the life they've chosen, her and Oliver. And she wouldn't change it for the world. Even though there's Ellie and the new life growing inside her, that's not going to stop them. It obviously doesn't in the future. If there's one thing she's learned over the last month, it's that this - this *right here* - makes them stronger.

Still, while Ellie's handled it better than she's had any right to expect from a three-year-old, Felicity would spare her that if she could.

But she can't.

So she does the only thing she can do - she offers reassurance and love, soft spoken words and a gentle hand.

"Everybody's okay, Ellie," Felicity promises. The toddler hums happily in response, her eyes finally staying shut. Felicity's fingers trip along the knots of her daughter's spine, between her cape and pyjama top, in long, even strokes. "We all love you and we're all safe, baby girl. Just rest your eyes for a bit."

It's not even a minute before Ellie's muscles go lax, her hold on her mother's leg loosening. A little half-snort half-snore slips past her parted lips as a thin trail of drool makes it way from her mouth to the pillow beneath her. She's *out*, solidly out, but Felicity makes no immediate move to leave her side.

She's content in this space, in this moment in time. Part of her is grateful that Oliver got called away. As much as she loves him and wants him at her side, she wants this, too. Little moments with her daughter that are just the two of them. They've so rarely had that and maybe it's the pregnancy hormones, but she finds she's craving it now with an intensity that surprises her.

There'd been an odd kind of bond she'd felt with her daughter right from the start, right from the moment Ellie had reached for her and called her Momma. But the way that's grown over the past month, how it's intensified, she never could have guessed. Part of that is because she knows Ellie better. Part of it is probably because she loves Oliver even more, too. Seeing bits of this man she adores reflected in her little girl is amazing. But regardless of *why*, it is there. And as new as Ellie really is to their lives, it feels like she's always been a part of it now, like she undeniably *belongs*. When Felicity tries to think about where they might be without Ellie having shown up, she finds she can't. More than that, though, she finds she doesn't want to.

"You're safe," Felicity tells the little girl, leaning over and pressing a kiss to her daughter's temple. "I love you, Ellie-bug." The sleeping toddler gives her a contented sigh. She wriggles slightly, unconsciously seeking her mother's warmth. She doesn't wake though, settling in when she does find that warmth, and Felicity's glad. Ellie has to be emotionally exhausted. Felicity definitely is. And on top of that, she's physically drained, not that she's going to tell Oliver about that until they're both securely in bed, wrapped around Ellie.

The thought of Oliver has Felicity looking up with a furrowed brow. He's been gone for more than a few minutes. At least five, because while Ellie might have brushed her teeth in near-record time, she'd at least gotten the toothpaste on her teeth this time.

Who's at the door?

It's only when she glances at the clock that she hears the dim sound of voices in the hallway.

She immediately recognizes one of them as Oliver, but the other…

Laurel?

Felicity strains her ears and it takes her a second to confirm that it is indeed the other Lance sister.

What couldn't wait until morning?

The words are mostly muffled - Oliver's tone is clearly annoyed - but it's only when she hears the words '*Thea'* and '*Blood*' that she puts the pieces together. With a sighed, "Oh," Felicity sinks back against the headboard. Laurel's devotion to justice is single-minded and driven, which *is* a good thing… most of the time. But Thea's definitely not ready for any kind of recounting about what happened. She's sure Sara was the one to tell Laurel about what had happened that morning, but probably not all the details. Laurel may know about what they do and who Oliver is now, but she doesn't know all of it, nor does she need to.

Felicity has to wonder what Laurel said to convince Oliver to even bring her upstairs to see Thea, but she doesn't linger on that. Mostly because she doesn't have the mental capacity to. Oliver can deal with it. Or Roy will. Or Thea herself. But not her. Nope, she's reached her limit for the day.

Which becomes increasingly more evident as she relaxes further into the headboard, slouching down over Ellie, her eyes slipping shut…

"Nope," Felicity says, forcing herself to sit up, blinking herself awake. "I'm awake. We're staying awake." Checking to make sure she hasn't woken Ellie, Felicity eases off the bed, careful not to jostle her. She wants to stay up for Oliver, wants to get a few more kisses, talk a bit more, just *be* with him during what's becoming a rare occurrence of peace. Felicity stretches, whispering, "Your girls need you in here, Oliver, hurry up."

The voices fade slightly outside the door, so she busies herself with small everyday tasks. She grabs Ellie's dirty laundry and tosses it into the bin. She collects Ellie's ever-growing collection of toys - she swears they self-multiply, but it's probably her mother and Moira's faults -

piling them in the corner. Mostly, she's killing time until Oliver comes back, but it also keeps her where she can pause, take a breath and soak in Ellie's presence.

She will never tire of watching her daughter sleep.

Laurel's voice is gone, but Roy and Oliver can both be heard now, their hushed words rising in volume a bit as they argue about something. It sounds like Laurel got her way and Roy is none too happy about it. She can't imagine Oliver's thrilled either, but if he's siding with Laurel it probably means it's at Thea's request and Felicity has to respect that. He wouldn't have made this decision a month ago, wouldn't have stepped back and allowed her to make her own choices when they directly contradict what he wants for her.

It's another reminder of how much he's changed these past few weeks. They all have.

And they're all better for it.

Felicity hums to herself as she pulls the blanket up over Ellie - is that the theme song to Rascal the Raccoon? God, she needs to watch some grown up television soon. She mimics the sort of cocoon the little girl's used to having with her parents, tucking it around her little body, saying under her breath, "You've gotta start watching shows with less catchy theme songs, young lady," when someone screams.

It's a shrill cry of pain and terror that slices through the air, startling her so bad she nearly screams herself.

For a split second, she just freezes, because it's so ill-fitting, so *wrong*. It doesn't make sense. The tachyon alarms aren't going off and all the people aiming to kill them are gone, save for Zoom. And it can't be him, because the energy it takes for him to even try to cross over is a giant red flag they can trace now.

Everyone's safe. It doesn't *fit*.

Felicity spins towards the door, a surge of fear and adrenaline making her arms feel like they're going to vibrate off. She doesn't even realize she's grabbed Ellie's leg until she looks down, her body twisted in a way to put herself between the danger and her child. But there isn't any danger, not in here.

What's happening?

She's torn between guarding Ellie and going to find out what's happening. There's more muffled voices, but the prevalent sound is the slap of feet hitting the ground as people come running.

It's only because of the fact that nobody's beating down the door that Felicity finds the middle ground between both worlds. She darts to the door, keeping one eye on Ellie as she opens it. Shouts and alarmed voices fill the air, echoed by desperate, wet gasps for air and someone crying. Heart lurching - because *where's Oliver?* - Felicity looks out, her eyes finding Thea's open door.

"Felicity!" Diggle snaps. She lets out a startled yelp, turning to see him running towards her, his gun drawn. "Get back in that room and lock the door," he orders before bolting past her.

"Digg, what's going on?" she asks, but he doesn't even break stride, tossing back a, "Lock the door!" again before disappearing into Thea's room.

Part of her wants to follow him, to see what's happening, to see what she can do to help… to check on Oliver. But the larger part of her is glued in place, because she refuses to leave Ellie. And then there's the reality that a lock probably isn't going to do much good anyway. Still, after another second of hesitation, she does as he commands. Felicity locks the door swiftly, wondering if it would be absurd to use a chair as a barricade, as she puts herself between it and Ellie's sleeping form. Her hands feel empty and useless and she looks around; there's nothing she can use as a weapon. Not that she'd be all that effective at wielding one, but she'd at least *try*.

Time slips by in halted seconds, taking too long, way too long. It leaves too much room for her to wonder what happened and who was hurt. The shouting continues, as do the pained cries. They're muffled and hard to hear at first, but then another agonized scream pierces Felicity's eardrums. It's a female, she registers absently. She hates that that's a source of comfort, but it is. Because it means Oliver's not hurt.

"Get Sara! *Now!*"

Oliver.

Felicity's eyes slip shut.

Hearing his voice is a whole new level of reassurance… but the sound of it rips into her. His voice is sharp and clear, with a sense of urgency that belies the severity of whatever's going on. She doesn't know who

he's talking to, but the thundering footfalls that race down the hall send a chill down her spine. God, she's dying to know what's going on. It eats at her, making her fingers feel hot and itchy as she starts pacing restlessly. She's blind and useless sitting in here, just *waiting*. She wants to *help*. It's never occurred to her before quite how much being on the comms is a comfort during missions, but it *is*. It *is,* because in spite of however bad it gets, she can *see* it. It isn't left to her too-vivid imagination.

"No! *No!* Roy, hold her!" Oliver shouts, his voice hitting her like a physical blow. Felicity lurches toward the door, ready to open it, to help him, to alleviate the grief she hears, but she stops at the last second. It leaves her plastered to the thick wood, her ear pressed against it - she hears everything, and instead of alleviating the desperation she feels, it only makes it worse. "Don't let her go, don't let her go… *Sara*!"

Oh, but the pain in his voice is gut-wrenching.

Is it…?

Squeezing her eyes shut, a sinking suspicion slowly fills her mind. It paints a painful picture in her mind, one she desperately wants to deny.

Feet pound against the carpet in the opposite direction - two pairs - and Sara's wail a moment later confirms it. The sound is bone-chilling, almost otherworldly in its primal nature, and it sends a spiraling feeling of panic through Felicity. Because now she knows. Even if she hasn't been told yet… she *knows*. The panic quickly coalesces with horror, confusion and fear. All of it makes her lungs feel like they're made of wood as tears burn her eyes.

Oh God, *what happened*?

Something has her glancing back at the bed, looking at Ellie. The little girl sleeps on, not a care in the world, and for reasons Felicity can't possibly fathom, it has more tears surging forward. She bites the tip of her tongue to keep her sob at bay as she turns back to the door. Just moments ago she'd been thinking about how *peaceful* things were, how soft and easy and wonderful, and just like… just like that it was gone, lost in the sea of hurt and pain coming from the other side of the door.

"Ambulance." It's Caitlin. Her usually soft voice is raised with undeniable urgency. "*Now*, or I'm going to lose her right here on this floor."

"No," Sara chokes out. The raw emotion is almost too much, but underneath it all, her voice is decisive. "I'm faster. You're coming with me."

"Then we need to go. Immediately," Caitlin tells her. "Do you have a board? Something to keep her flat?"

The answer to that is drowned out by a heartrending sobbing noise, one that leaves a sickening feeling settling in Felicity's gut. *Oh*, this is bad. A wave of nausea rolls through her and she bows her head. This is so bad, and she can't begin to imagine the impact it will have going forward. Not only on them, but on…

"Ollie? Oh my god… What did I… Ollie, what did I do?" There's a manic quality to Thea's voice, and it redoubles the nausea sitting in the pit of her stomach. "I don't… I can't…" Her voice shakes with terror as she cries. As she begs. "Oh god, please… let me… Laurel, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Sara, please, just… just…"

"Let's go," Sara says. It's not the woman Felicity heard a mere few seconds ago. No, this is the woman who came to them from the League of Assassins. "Digg, get the other side."

"I'm sorry…"

"Put her under," Oliver orders, his voice cracking. "Caitlin, we need her out. We can't.-"

"Ollie, please…" Tears saturate Thea's voice. Felicity covers her mouth, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*. I wasn't… God, I can *feel* it, I can feel it inside me. Stop me, I want… I don't want to be like this… No, *no*! Don't come near me! I don't want to hurt anyone else… *Please*, please don't… don't… No!"

Her pleas quickly melt into near-rabid shouts right before someone grabs her. Felicity can hear the struggle, along with Oliver's own pleas of, "I'm so sorry, Thea, I thought… we thought you were okay…"

"Please…"

"Shh, shh, I've got you, Thea, I have you…"

"I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to. Please don't let me. Please, *please*…" Thea's begging ends on a sob, her words increasingly sluggish and weak, and then… nothing.

There's a moment where it's silent, nothing more than the shuffle of feet and a quiet, "*Careful,*" from Sara. Felicity's pretty sure her own heart is beating loud enough for all of them to hear it. As silence prevails, leaving a ringing echo of whatever had happened in its wake, Felicity glances back at the bed. Ellie's slept through all of it, blissfully unaware of how her world has suddenly and radically shifted in her sleep. Her little voice talking about her Aunt Thea fills Felicity's ears and she takes a shaky breath, feeling another sob building.

It won't be the same. It can't be.

Not after this.

"Oh God," Felicity whispers, shoving her hand under her glasses, cupping her face. Her tears are like acid against her suddenly cold fingers as she stands by the door. What should she do? Should she wait? What about Oliver… Thea…

It's eerie, the way the house settles after a careful series of footfalls hurry past her door. She's so on edge, so ready to jump at any noise, that when someone tries to turn the knob before knocking on the door, she jolts with a sharp inhale.

"Felicity?"

It's Oliver. His voice is wet and raw, like the life's been pulled right out of him.

Felicity doesn't waste a second, fumbling with the knob to unlock it before she whips the door open.

The first thing that hits her is the thick, coppery smell of blood permeating the hallway.

And the second…

She'd known it was bad, knew that whatever had happened had ended with bloodshed, with someone needing to be rushed to the hospital, with Thea having to be put under, but nothing prepares her for the sight that greets her.

The bottom half of Oliver's shirt is soaked with blood, in oblong, irregular patterns, and his hands… they're stained with it. His fingers are still wet where they shake at his side. His face is crumpled with pain, his eyes bloodshot and puffy, his cheeks covered in tears. They mix with the small smear of blood on his cheek and forehead.

"It's Thea," he instantly says, his voice trembling as bad as his hands. It's almost like he needs to get it out before the thought overwhelms him. "She's not okay. She's… she's not okay. And Laurel, she's… God, I don't know if they can save her, because Thea…"

"Oliver," Felicity breathes before she throws her arms around him. She doesn't care about the blood. She doesn't feel it or smell it the instant she has him wrapped in her embrace, because he's all that matters. He's more important and he needs her as much as he ever has in this moment. "We'll help her," she promises, pressing her face into his neck. He reciprocates, but it does little to soothe him. His shaking only gets worse. "We'll help her, Oliver, okay, we'll…"

Her words fade, because she doesn't know what else to say.

"I didn't know," he says, his voice so small it breaks her heart. Felicity holds him even tighter, as tight as she can, wishing there was a way to absorb his pain into herself, so she could carry it for him. He's practically vibrating with it, and it only gets worse when a fresh wave of tears hit. "I didn't know this was going to happen, I didn't know…"

"Shh," Felicity whispers. "This isn't your fault."

"And Laurel, she… I couldn't… do anything, I thought Thea was *fine*."

"We all did, Oliver. We knew the cure would take time. We shouldn't have pushed her."

"No," he chokes out, his voice muffled against her skin. "It's more than that." He pulls back, and the abject pain on his face hurts her more than anything else in this moment. His face crumples and she runs her hands down his cheekbones, wanting to take it away. But he doesn't feel it as he stares at her. "It wasn't just mirakuru."

That stops her. "What?" she asks. "What do you mean?"

"They dosed her with Vertigo, too, and Caitlin thinks… she thinks…" He grits his teeth, inhaling through them, squeezing his eyes shut, like he can't remember, or can't string the words together. "She thinks that maybe they… interacted, or… fragmented her mind? So, she'll be fine one minute and the next…"

And the next she can be anyone or anything. A danger to them all.

"Oh my god," Felicity whispers. And then she's shaking her head. She grips his face tight as she says, "No, Oliver. I refuse to accept that. *You*

have to refuse to accept that. We're going to help her. Treat her, cure her, *something.* She won't be like this forever. She can't."

If she'd been paying attention, she'd notice she sounds just as manic as Thea did a moment ago. But it doesn't take away from what she's saying, or the meaning behind it. She might be desperately trying to believe it herself, but it's still *true*. They can't give up.

Oliver nods, trying to absorb her words, willing them to be true, but the pained look on his face…

God, it hits her so deeply that it socks the wind out of her.

"But," he says, his voice uneven, "even if that's true, even if she gets better… she's always going to have to live with… with what she did."

He can't say it, he can't finish that thought. Felicity's not about to make him say it either.

But it does remind her that there's still so much she doesn't know.

"Is Laurel going to live?" she asks. It comes out as little more than a whisper and Oliver doesn't answer right away.

When he does, it's no louder than her question.

"I don't know," he replies, his voice distant and lost. "Felicity… I don't know. And this is… God, it's too much, but all I can think is thank god this didn't happen when she was holding Ellie." He makes a pained sound deep in his chest. "Because this is bad enough, but… but if she had…"

The wave of nausea that hits her at his words is stronger than before and has nothing at all to do with morning sickness. She can't even fathom it, but he's *right*. He's so right. After all of their battles, all of their victories, they could so easily have lost Ellie to Thea's madness. As horrific as this is - and *oh*… it is - they got lucky.

Oliver's next breath is rattled with tears and Felicity grabs his face, forcing him to look her in the eye.

"She's fine, Oliver," she says with a watery smile. "She's right there and she's *fine*."

"But she could have-"

"No," Felicity interrupts him, shaking her head fiercely. "No 'could

haves.' She's okay. We need to be grateful for that and deal with the problems at hand instead of imaginary ones that never happened."

"You're right," he echoes dimly. "I know you are. I just… Felicity… I wasn't prepared for this. My sister can't be a killer. She can't be Laurel's killer." His face pinches at the thought, at the fact that he has to say it at all. "I don't know how to help her. I don't know how Sara will ever forgive either of us, how Roy will cope with everything, how my mom does. I just… I don't know what to do, I don't-"

She cuts him off with a kiss. She does it as much to steal the words from his lips as to take some of the burden from his shoulders.

It's hard and forceful, a kiss borne more of denial and strength than of desire or love… but maybe it *is* love, just of a different sort. Felicity wants to siphon off these worries, make them disappear, but she doesn't have a way of doing that so she kisses him as hard as she can, pulling his neck down to make the job easier. She kisses him until she feels him finally responding, as little as it is, until she feels her lungs start to burn, until there's nothing left but the most basic need for air.

When she finally pulls back, leaving him no less broken-looking and desperate, they're breathing hard, harsh lungfuls of air that burn more than they probably should.

Oliver stares at her numbly, and his need for help - for *guidance* - is painfully obvious.

"First," she says, stroking his cheeks, running her fingers over the blood on one, like that simple act will wash it away. "First, we wash your hands."

With a start, he looks down at his fingers - blood-stained again, but not with his blood this time. It's like he's just now noticing them. Oliver presses them together with an absent air that makes her uneasy. The red liquid is sticky, making a horrible wet noise where it's starting to dry on his skin.

He looks as nauseous as she felt a moment ago.

She doesn't hesitate in covering his hands, squeezing them in hers.

"One step at a time, Oliver," she tells him gently. He looks up at her. "First, we wash your hands. Then… we do whatever comes next."

He nods mechanically and lets her lead him to the bathroom. He's so

passive, following blindly wherever she leads, putting himself entirely in her hands. Because it's a safe place - *his* safe place - and because he knows she'll take care of him.

Without a word, Felicity leans him against the counter for support before letting his hands go long enough to tug his shirt over his head. He moves with her, without provocation, staring at her face like she's the only anchor he has right now. And maybe she is. She drops the shirt in the trash. She knows later she'll want to dispose of it properly, but not yet. She's not willing to be away from him.

She scans the wide expanse of his chest.

The blood didn't seep through.

Felicity turns on the water, testing its warmth before drawing his hands underneath it. The water instantly run pink, flakes of blood coming off, swirling around the drain, stark against the white porcelain. She scrubs soap over both of their fingers, taking her time, being thorough. She gets everything she can find, from his fingers all the way up his forearms.

The bubbles turn red, then pink, then - eventually - run clear until it's just their joined hands beneath the water.

"She was begging me," he whispers. Felicity presses her face against his shoulder, like she can ward all of this off. "She said she didn't want to be like this…"

"I heard," she confirms.

He continues like she hasn't even spoken. "I think… I think maybe she meant she wanted to… she didn't want to…"

"No," Felicity says firmly. She knows exactly where he's going and she is more than aware she can't let him go down that road. She shuts off the water and grabs him, turning him around to face her. Their hands are still wet, but clean. She leaves trails of water across his chest as she cups his neck. "She wasn't even close to being in her right mind, Oliver. You *know* that. That's why everything happened in the first place. Thea didn't know what she was asking. She was only aware enough to know she didn't want to hurt anyone."

Felicity's pretty certain he doesn't entirely believe her, but she can see he wants to. Badly. He nods, looking at her with a kind of desperation that seeks something, *anything*, to keep him going.

The fact that he wants it has to be enough.

"She's unconscious right now?" Felicity asks.

Oliver nods. "Yeah. She's out for a while. Roy and Lyla are both watching her and she's… and Lyla…" Regret-laced pain flickers over his face. "She put Thea in restraints."

That hadn't even occurred to Felicity. But while the notion of it clearly hurts him, she's glad to hear it, and so grateful - for possibly the one-hundred-thousandth time - that Lyla is here with them.

"Good," Felicity says, nodding. "That's good. It means we can keep her out while we figure out how to help her. Because we will help her. She can come back from this, Oliver. She *can*. But she's going to need us." She slides her hands up to his cheeks, forcing him to look at her, to *keep* looking at her. "She's gonna need *you*."

It takes him a second, but he finally blows a steadying breath through his lips. Oliver nods, his eyes finally connecting with hers, *really* seeing her, like he's only just *now* registering her presence for the first time since she pulled him into their room.

"Felicity," he whispers, "if Laurel dies-"

"If Laurel dies, it still won't be Thea's fault," Felicity interrupts. "It will be Isabel's. And Blood's. And Slade's. But it won't be hers."

"She won't see it that way," Oliver replies a little abruptly, his certainty unwavering. She suspects it's probably because he's been in similar shoes, because he's always blamed himself.

"And that's why she'll need us," Felicity points out. "To remind her it's not her fault. To have faith in her. That's true whether…" She takes a steadying breath, because her next words are not easy. "Whether Laurel lives or not."

Oliver bites his lip, pursing them together as the reality of what they're talking about settles in. He's processing this in layers, she realizes, bits and pieces. He says something and he's so removed from it, but then a second later it really hits. "You're right," he says. He sighs as he searches her eyes for a moment before nodding. "I know you're right. I just… I never wanted this for her. Not her."

"I know," Felicity confirms. She slides one hand up into his hair, and his eyes flutter shut for a quick second before she slips it back down to

cup his still-injured cheek. "I know. But we can't control everything. All we can do is move forward."

With an weary groan, Oliver steps closer, resting his forehead against hers. She can feel the bone-deep exhaustion seeping from his body.

It has been an exceedingly long day.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he breathes out quietly against her.

"Luckily for you, you don't have to find out," she replies a bit cheekily. It does nothing to alleviate the weight of what's happened, but it does have him huffing slightly. She gives him a small smile, grabbing his hands. "Come on. We should get some sleep."

"No." Oliver shakes his head. "You go ahead," he says, stepping back. He doesn't let go of her hands. "I think I'm gonna sit with Thea for a bit."

"Oliver…" she chastises softly.

"Just for a bit," he emphasizes. "I know I need rest. And I… I need you and Ellie, too." He bows his head, his eyes watching his thumbs as they rub across the back of her hands. "I need to hold you both. Especially after today. But first…" He looks at her again. "I need to see Thea again. Make sure she's… I don't know, as okay as she can be I guess."

After a beat, she finally replies, "Okay."

"Okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," she agrees. "Oliver, if that's what you need, I'm not going to begrudge you that. She's your sister and this… It's big. I get that."

The look he offers her is one of pained appreciation. He steps back towards her, the move underlined with a quiet urgency that makes her stomach clench, and kisses her. It's soft and quiet, and he lingers against her lips with a blatant affection that has nothing at all to do with the circumstances and everything to do with *them*.

"Thank you," he whispers a hair's breadth away from her mouth before kissing her twice more. The simple act is so full of love, a love she feels in her bones. She loves this man, with everything in her, and while hell is breaking loose *again*, she's so, so grateful that he's here,

that he turned to her, that he leaned on her.

Felicity nods against him. "I'll see you in a bit."

With one last kiss, he turns. He keeps their fingers tangled as long as he can. He grabs a fresh t-shirt from the closet - which reminds Felicity she needs to get rid of the one she just took off of him - and makes a direct beeline for the bed, for Ellie. Oliver moves to kneel down before changing his mind, wincing when it puts too much pressure on his knee. Instead, he leans over, kissing Ellie's forehead, whispering something to her. He strokes her hair gently as he stands, his thumb brushing over her little eyebrow.

Even from where she still stands in the bathroom Felicity can see he's starting to shake again.

He glances back at her once more before he goes.

Felicity doesn't remember falling asleep.

She does remember turning all the lights off in the bedroom before changing her mind - once the darkness had settled in around her, once she wasn't able to actually see Ellie even though she was right there, a sliver of panic had her sitting up and turning on the lamp on the nightstand. She remembers that, and she remembers curling around her daughter, making a cocoon all their own. The last thing she remembers is thinking she won't be able to sleep, not with the sight of blood all over Oliver in her mind's eye, with Laurel's broken cries of pain and Thea's sobs echoing in her ear. It's a testament to how exhausted she is, though, because when her eyes slip shut, they stay that way.

Until a soft rustle has her waking.

She comes out of sleep in lethargic waves. Something tells her there's nothing to worry about, nothing that should alarm her, and as a result it takes way too long for her to pull her eyes open.

The room is still softly lit from the lamp on the nightstand, but it's different. Changed.

She doesn't have to open her eyes to know Oliver's back.

"Hey," she whispers, blinking herself awake. Felicity sits up - she fell asleep with her glasses on; they're off-kilter, letting her see Oliver clearly with only one eye where he sits at the foot of the bed. She

readjusts them, trying to fight a yawn, but losing the battle. When he doesn't respond right away, she untangles herself from a still-sleeping Ellie and tosses back the comforter. "Oliver?"

"I didn't mean to wake you," he whispers.

The sound of his voice has her waking up faster than anything else could right now.

"What happened?" she asks, scooting across the bed gingerly. She's still groggy, but her hands are steady when she reaches him. She rubs his arm, moving up his shoulder and over his back. His muscles are hard as rocks, tight and tense under her touch, like he's been sitting just like this for *hours*. "Oliver."

His response is to blow out a short heavy breath before he turns to her. His face is haggard and she has to wonder what time it is since it looks like he's been up for a week straight. His eyes are even more bloodshot, strain deepening the lines in his face. He looks like he's barely holding it together and Felicity's shoulders fall, her hand sliding up the back of his neck as she whispers his name.

Oliver moves for her at the same time she reaches for him and they wrap themselves around each other. Without warning, he pulls her closer, picking her up and twisting her until she's in his lap, her legs hanging off to the side of his. He takes a shuddery breath as he wraps her up in his arms, burying his face against her chest. It's more burrowing, like he's seeking out her warmth, wanting to lose himself in her.

Felicity holds him just as tight, nuzzling the top of his head.

"Laurel's still in surgery," he offers. His voice rumbles through her chest. He's quiet, detached.

"How long has she been in there?" Felicity asks, angling her head to look at the clock. It's barely past one in the morning. Oh, that's not good. "Has she been in there this entire time?"

"Yeah." Oliver takes another shaky breath. It seems to be the only kind he can take right now. "They're trying to repair her liver and the damage to her lungs and juxtahepatic veins. Her lungs just got nicked, but the liver and the veins… they were pierced when she… when Thea…"

"But she's still alive," Felicity interrupts, stroking his hair in a soothing

motion. She runs her fingers through it, and it seems to work, although the tension living under his skin doesn't go anywhere. "She's fighting."

"Yeah."

He doesn't sound sure, at all, but there isn't anything she can say, anything that will make this better, so she switches tactics.

"And Thea?" she asks. "How is she?"

That is the wrong topic switch. He's holding strong for Laurel, bolstered by the news that she's still alive, that she's still fighting for her life, but Thea… that's the thing that breaks him. He falls against her, an amazing feat considering he's holding her right now, but he manages, curling in against her as he lets out a broken breath. It matches his tone as he replies.

"She… she woke up, after a few hours, which…" He gives her a sardonic laugh. "You should've seen Caitlin's face when she saw Thea waking up, because she gave her enough to keep her out for a full day, but she… she's burning it off, or it's not metabolizing correctly, because of the mirakuru and Vertigo. We don't know what mixture of the Vertigo she got, which is… making things difficult. And Caitlin, she checked her blood as much as she could here and the Vertigo, it's… She said it's cancelling the cure out."

Felicity's frozen. "It's… what?"

"It's cycling the cure out of her system," Oliver continues, his voice leveling off into something far more monotone, as if relaying the facts is the only way he'll be able to get all the information out. "Cancelling it out, like it's… overpowering it, or… she doesn't know. And she doesn't know how or why, but what little cure she does get only works for a short amount of time before it starts to wear off. So those lucid moments that she… when she was awake earlier before she… snapped…" He pauses, like he's back in the room, back when she'd attacked Laurel. "It's the only thing she'll get until she needs another dose. So they need to figure out what kind of Vertigo she was given, how it's mixing with the mirakuru, what it's doing combined... And when they do. Even *if* they do, no guarantee that they'll come up something to help her."

Oliver grits his teeth, and she can feel his jaw clenching against her breast.

"I heard Caitlin and Cisco talking and they don't know what to do," he says, a slowly growing aggravation coating the words. "Cisco thinks it might adapt, based on what they saw, so until they work out what she was given, she's going to have to stay sedated. The Vertigo isn't killing her because the mirakuru is keeping it at bay, but the Vertigo is tainting the mirakuru, making it incurable because they don't… they just don't *know*."

"But they're looking," Felicity interrupts, pulling back to look at him. "They're going to help her, Oliver."

"How can they help her when they don't know what to do, Felicity?" he argues. The words come out in a hushed tone, but the anger filling them is as loud as if he was shouting. "They don't know what she has in her system, because the mirakuru's changed it? Or it's… tainted it, I don't know. How they can help her if they don't… How can I help my baby sister if they can't? If the people *qualified* to help her can't, what the hell am I supposed to do? What can I do?"

"I don't know," she replies. Her lack of answer has him closing his eyes, shaking his head in exasperation. Felicity shrugs for emphasis, because she really doesn't know. "I don't know, Oliver, I don't have answers just as much as they don't." When he doesn't look at her again, she grabs his chin, forcing him to. "But assuming they're never going to help her gets you nowhere. You can't give up because they didn't find anything in the first few hours. It takes *time*, Oliver, it's not magic."

"I know that," he says, and it almost comes out in a growl as he grips her tighter, his fingers digging into her. It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't feel good, and when she shifts without thinking to get away from his grip, he instantly releases her. Neither of them noticed when he'd sat up taller, when he'd straightened his shoulders, his posture falling in line with his aggravation, but it's suddenly gone when he realizes how he's talking to her, how he's holding her. "God, Felicity, I'm sorry, I didn't…"

"I get it." Felicity doesn't let him look away. She cups his face, staring into his eyes. "It's okay. I know this is… frustrating." He snorts, and she knows it's because that word is not nearly strong enough. "But I'd rather you were in here venting at me than, well, not. Venting, I mean." She stares at him for a beat. "I'm so sorry, Oliver, I know this is… this… It sucks."

He laughs at that, an incredulous short burst of laughter that's almost

loud enough to wake Ellie.

"For lack of a better term," she adds with a tug of her lips.

"It does," he breathes, leaning into her. "It really does." His head falls against her, his forehead resting against her neck. He holds her closer, taking a series of deep breaths before he falls still. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she replies, wrapping herself around him as much as she can.

Not for the first time she wishes she could take away all his pain. Or at least carry some of it. She is, she knows she is, just by virtue of being here for him, being someone he can lean on and talk to, but she wants to reach inside and soothe the ache she knows lives in his chest. She can feel it in the way he holds her, how he keeps having to force himself to breathe normally, how he vibrates with energy, a phantom energy he really does not have. She wants to shield him from any more of it, because he's been through enough.

And it's worse because she knows it's so far from over.

Whispering, "I love you," again, she starts peppering soft kisses against his temple. She moves down his cheek, whispering it over and over, like maybe the power of her love for him can do all of that for her. And maybe it does work, because he sighs, leaning into her further, turning his face towards her, seeking an absolution from the weight of his emotion trying to pull him under. She loves him, so very much, and she pushes that love into each kiss. They're soft and simple, cherishing, lingering, as she works her way over his brow, down his nose, to his other temple and back.

It's quiet and easy… until she reaches his lips.

The second hers hover over his, kissing him softly once or twice, she feels the energy between them suddenly shift.

His breath dances over her skin, his lips trembling against hers. He clutches her closer, his hands gripping her t-shirt in tight fists. Heat comes off him in waves, enveloping her, pulling her in, and she lets out a tremulous gasp. It'd be so easy - the bathroom is right there, or the closet. They could sneak in there for a few minutes, she knows they wouldn't take long. The sudden cascade of need building between them is so intense it takes her breath away. It fills her, crawling over her skin, leaving her so very warm. It's a product of their day - a product of the last few days, really - and they both know it, but it

doesn't matter.

The need to lose themselves in each other, to seek solace just as much as to reaffirm that they're both still here, that they're okay and they will go on, nearly takes over. It's a natural reaction to the day's events, the desire to do *something*, to show that they're still standing, that they're going to still be here when the next tide rolls in…

But they can't, and they both know it. Not with Ellie right here, not with her unprotected in the room on her own. It may have been over a week ago, but what happened with Malcolm is still very fresh in their minds, and tachyon detector or not, things are too on edge for either of them to be comfortable leaving Ellie by herself, even for a few moments.

And none of that even touches on the consideration of Thea being right down the hall.

So no, they can't give in, not right now.

That doesn't diminish the near-violent *want* flowing between them like a living thing. It's in her touch when her hands slide up into his hair, when she takes a deep breath and her chest moves against his, when she squeezes her thighs together, feeling his body responding under hers. She feels it in the way his breath stutters, how his heart pounds just as loud and fast as hers, how he whispers her name, his lips moving against hers.

"I know," Felicity whispers, nodding. "I know."

"Felicity…"

Fe-li-ci-ty.

She shivers and he holds her tighter… but that's as far as it goes. That's as far as it can go.

When her lips brush against his again, this time with the slightest bit more pressure, he moans, and the sound is almost her undoing. With a deep breath, Felicity forces herself to pull back, just enough to put space between them. She knows one kiss will turn into more and it might very well take over, and they can't, not right now.

And Oliver knows it.

He doesn't let her go though. Instead he pulls her against him,

eliminating the slight distance that had felt like a vast expanse, pressing his face into her chest again as he holds her as tight as he can. She returns it readily, whimpering against him - not because it's too much, but because it's not enough.

They hold each other for a while, leaning on each other, until the pull of sleep becomes too much. She's gotten more sleep than Oliver has and she's still exhausted, but it's nothing compared to Oliver when he starts slouching against her.

"C'mon," she says, sitting up. She pulls on him, making her intention clear as she slips off his lap. She doesn't need to say it for him to understand, not that it matters. He follows her blindly. She leads him to the spot she'd been occupying when she'd woken up - the spot that'd become his without them ever outright acknowledging it - and he lays down, instantly curling around Ellie.

Oliver lifts her up slightly, cuddling her against his chest as he buries his face in her hair. He takes a deep breath, a cleansing breath, just before Felicity turns off the light. The irrational fear of the dark she'd felt earlier is gone now that Oliver's here.

Ellie lets out a drawn-out snore as Felicity makes her way to her side, completely gone to the world.

She hears Oliver pulling the comforter back for her and she climbs in, snuggling into the cocoon with her family. Oliver reaches over, pulling her closer, practically smooshing Ellie between them. He rubs his hand down her arm. He grips her hip before sliding his hand down over her stomach. He holds it there, whispering, "C'mere," urging her closer. Now that Ellie's between them, a kiss is far less dangerous… and yet, when their lips touch, that earlier need is still there. She thinks it might be there for a while.

After a series of lingering kisses that have them both feeling the same yearning for more, but also recognizing that they can't have it yet, they settle in. They both wrap around Ellie, their hands managing to find each other, tangling together.

Sleep almost has her under when Oliver suddenly whispers, "Thea attacked me."

That wakes her right up.

"Thea… she attacked you, she…?" It's only because sleep is right there that she struggles to understand exactly what he's saying. *Thea*

attacked me. Like she attacked Laurel. She chokes out a noise she's never made before, moving to touch him. She knows he isn't hurt, she'd just seen him, she'd just held him. Still… "Did she hurt you? Did she get you? Oliver-"

"I'm okay," Oliver replies, raising his voice so she hears him. "I'm okay, she didn't… she wasn't fast enough."

What if she had been?

Felicity's voice is rough with the reality of that 'what if' as she asks, "So when you said Thea woke up…"

"It's how we knew the cure was completely out of her system," he says. He's almost tranquil in the way he reports it and she wants to hit him for his sudden blasé attitude. She knows - *she knows* - it's because he's here with her and Ellie, but *still*. "She broke the restraints Lyla had on her and she just… It was like before."

Before.

With Slade.

The reminder is a chilling one and it has her ire fading away. It's then that she notices he's holding Ellie close, so close, cradling her in a way that would tell anyone who looks at him that he's not letting her go. She knows he's thinking about when she'd been in Thea's arms, when they'd thought everything had been okay… only to find out that everything they thought they knew was right was wrong.

"We'll get her back, Oliver," Felicity says, speaking clearly. "We're going to save her. Again."

He doesn't respond, but when he pulls her close for one last kiss, she thinks he believes her this time.

Chapter 37

There's something to be said for the term 'harsh light of day,' because despite Felicity's best efforts, when they wake up the world is even worse than the one they'd gone to sleep in.

Thea's chained to the bed - real, actual *chains*, the source of which she isn't ready to question since she really doesn't want to know who had chains in the Queen Manor and *why*.

Oliver had called Moira after Laurel was taken to the hospital. The second she'd heard Thea's name, she'd dropped everything and hurried home. She hasn't left Thea's bedside, not once, despite Oliver's rather vocal protests for her safety.

It'd come to a head this morning when Oliver and Moira started talking. And by talking she means *yelling.* Moira's fears are the same as Oliver's - about what the next step is, about what *choices* they have. Because there have to be choices, there has to be something that can be *done*. Felicity hadn't stuck around to hear the rest of the conversation. When Moira's voice had raised, Ellie's face had crumpled, so it'd been a visit to her fairies to cheer her up.

And then there's Laurel…

She's out of surgery, finally, but her prognosis is still questionable. Felicity hadn't needed to be on the call with Sara to know that. The reality of it had been painfully written all over Oliver's face. Her odds are far from optimistic, but there's nothing to do except wait.

Felicity isn't very good at waiting. Oliver's even worse.

Which is why they're pulling up in front of the hospital right now, steadfast Frank at the wheel and Diggle in the back with her, Oliver and Ellie.

The sight that greets them has Diggle cursing under his breath. He still has a thick white bandage taped to where he'd gotten knocked in the head during the fight with Slade. It moves as he scowls out the window.

Another thing about the harsh light of day? It's got nothing on the intrusive and startlingly bright flashes of cameras from the obnoxiously large horde of reporters standing outside the hospital

entrance.

Felicity doesn't get a chance to whisper, "Oh no," before they're on the car, cameras shoved up against the windows, flashes going off, people hitting the glass as they yell questions that are drowned out in their own cacophony.

Oliver's jaw clenches in response. He squeezes her hand before lifting their tangled fingers into his lap, where he cradles them against his palm. He's already on edge, buried under so many unanswered questions about Thea, unknowns about Laurel… and here they are, trying to check on their friend, only to be met with vultures instead of a quiet peaceful path they *should* have encountered.

All of their names are shouted. Quite a few Ollie Queens are thrown out, something that makes Oliver's fingers involuntarily twitch. There's a handful of Felicity Smoaks and one Felicity Queen, which has her blanching, and then finally…

"Is Lily with you?"

Oliver positively bristles at the mention of their daughter. It's a stark reminder that to the outside world she's Lily, a ward of Felicity Smoak and, by extension, Oliver Queen. She isn't Ellie Queen, she isn't their daughter. It's a degree of separation that Felicity is suddenly wildly uncomfortable with.

"Why are they doing that?" Ellie asks, her face crinkling. She shrinks away from the window, turning into Diggle's side where she sits next to him. "It's too bright."

"It definitely is, munchkin," Diggle replies grimly, his eyes on the windows before he looks to Oliver sitting across from him. "We can't get to the back now."

"I know," Oliver says, just as grim, his face hard. His eyes narrow into a glare worthy of The Arrow as a woman starts tapping on the window incessantly. Her words are unintelligible amongst the other shouts as Frank pulls in front of the hospital. Oliver takes a stilted breath. "We're gonna have to go through."

"Yay," Felicity says weakly.

She remembers all too well the shocking assault that *two* reporters had mounted when their little family had come out of Verdant a few weeks ago. And that was nothing compared to the room full of them

at their press conference where they'd speculated about Ellie's presence in their lives - rather, Lily's. This was going to be worse than both of those encounters, judging by the way Frank has to roll to a stop to avoid running over anyone's toes.

Felicity leans into Oliver, holding his shoulder through his suit jacket. She wants to say, '*Can we just not?'* or '*How about you go and we'll stay here,'* or '*How about we try magic, have we tried magic?'* but she stops herself. Oliver hadn't been about to leave them behind at the manor that morning. He'd wanted them with him - *safe* - for his own state of mind. And as easy as it would be to leave her and Ellie in the car, for him to step in and see Laurel for a few minutes before leaving again, she isn't about to let him face all of that on his own, no matter how uncomfortable it gets.

He looks over at her. The instant their eyes meet, she smiles. It's full of steel and resolve.

It fortifies him.

They've got this. Just like everything else, they'll go in *together*, and that makes it so much easier.

"Where are we?" Ellie asks, staring at the window where the flashes continue to go off.

The windows are too tinted for the cameras to actually capture anything, but it isn't enough to stave off the blinding nature of them. The little girl looks at her mother with curious eyes. It hits Felicity that she's suddenly very grateful that her own mother had appeared when she did that morning, whisking Ellie off to let Oliver and Felicity get ready in peace. Because now at least Ellie is dressed halfway decent in a Chanel dress and a little overcoat that's tied off around her waist. It's all topped off with her tachyon detector hanging around her neck. It's covered in enough fairy baubles that Felicity's positive nobody will see anything overtly strange about it. Still, if anyone does say anything, she can attribute it to her daughter's fashion sense. Felicity has discovered that while she enjoys when Ellie dresses herself, it always results in clothes on backwards and mismatched items.

So, left to her own devices, she's basically the opposite of press-worthy.

"We're seeing Laurel, honey," Oliver replies. He sits up, leaning forward a bit, not letting Felicity go for a second. He smiles at his

daughter. "It's going to be really bright out there, so keep your face hidden like last time. Do you remember?"

"I remember." Ellie nods before frowning at the windows. "They were mean. Their mommas didn't teach them very good manners."

"No," Oliver says with a little smile. "No, they didn't." He takes a deep breath. "Okay. Do you wanna hop on over here and I'll-"

"Oliver," Diggle interrupts, raising an eyebrow. "Unless you plan on letting Felicity go anytime soon, why don't I take Ellie?"

It's only when he says something that Felicity realizes that while one of Oliver's hands is still wrapped around hers, the other has migrated around her legs. His large, warm palm is pressed against the outside of her thigh, his grip on her sure and slightly desperate, like he isn't letting her go anytime soon.

Oliver looks down - he didn't realize it either. The action warms her heart. She's certain it's not entirely to protect her, although that's probably what he's telling himself. And there's some measure of truth to that too, she's certain, but this is for his own sake. He doesn't want to let her go, because it will mean he's standing on his own, even if she's right there.

Felicity twists their hands so she's covering his. He looks back at her, his mouth opening slightly - if it's to apologize, she might hit him - but Diggle doesn't let him say anything.

"Let Felicity get you through the crowd," he says with a wry smile. Oliver's head whips back to look at him and Digg chuckles, reading him like a book, "And you take care of Felicity and the baby." He winks at Felicity and it's obvious he's doing his damnedest to lighten the mood. "Let the crazies try to get past that impenetrable brick wall of a man. I'll take care of this little one," he finishes, pressing his fingers into Ellie's stomach, eliciting a happy giggle from the toddler.

But Oliver hesitates, his eyes finding Ellie again. "You don't…"

"Let me help, Oliver," Diggle interrupts. "That's why I tagged along."

That *is* why he came along, that's true, although it's also true that he'd slammed his head into the concrete floor so hard yesterday it feels like a miracle he's even awake. He did get checked out by Caitlin, and - besides a few remarks about having a particularly hard head from Cisco, a knowing smile from Lyla, and a comparison to Oliver from

Felicity - he'd passed the exam.

Digg gives him a patient smile. "Trust me."

Oliver nods at the other man. Diggle would do everything in his power to protect Ellie, he knows that just as much as Felicity does. There's a newfound aspect to the bond the two men share. It's not just their mission anymore, but the parallel routes of their lives. They would have had each other's backs no matter what, but coming at everything from similar viewpoints… it makes a difference. Digg's commitment to protecting Ellie is far from one-sided. Oliver would do everything possible to protect Lyla and unborn baby Sara.

They're family, and that means when one of them says the words, '*Trust me,'* you trust them.

"Alright then," Oliver breathes. "Let's get this over with."

He glances at the front, catching Frank's eye in the rearview mirror. The ARGUS-agent-slash-Queen-family-driver - who is showing that he's apparently more loyal to the Queens than to ARGUS - gives him a diligent nod in return before getting out of the car. The second the door's open, the only thing they hear are shouted questions before Frank shuts the door behind him. Nobody says anything, all of them silently taking a second to realize what they're walking into, when Ellie breaks the silence.

"I'm not that little, Uncle Digg," she says. "I'm getting really big."

"As big as me?" Diggle teases, tugging on one of her curls.

"No," the toddler replies in exasperation, making Diggle chuckle. "That's just silly."

"I'm a silly guy," Digg says with a solemn nod.

"You are," Ellie replies, just as seriously.

"Are we ready?" Oliver asks, glancing at Felicity before looking at Ellie. "Stay with Uncle Diggle, Ellie, no matter what. It's going to be really bright out there. It's okay to keep your face tucked into Digg, like this." He illustrates touching his chest, ducking his head. "Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy."

"And if anyone says anything to you, you don't have to respond. Just

stick with Uncle Diggle, and listen to him."

Ellie nods with a bright smile that defies the chaos waiting for them outside the limo. It's as much confirmation as Oliver's going to get, and it's all he really needs, because when he looks at Felicity, she sees he's ready.

Frank works his way around the car, stopping in front of their door, standing guard, his hand on the handle, waiting for his cue from Oliver.

Is she ready?

Probably not so much, not that she has much choice in the matter. It's so much easier, she decides, to focus on those around her. She'd rather make sure *they're* ready instead of recognizing the dread sitting in the pit of her stomach at the thought of facing the media again. Especially after the last few days. Her strength isn't one hundred percent, nowhere near close, and she only knows that because her legs were a little too like jello when she stood up in her heels that morning. And she's still pretty tired. Oddly enough, having Oliver *with* her had resulted in her being unable to sleep, feeling the constant need to make sure he and Ellie were still there.

That's what happens, she supposes, when the man you love tells you his drugged sister attacked him, and the only reason she didn't get him was because he'd been fast enough to stop her. It wasn't so much that idea alone that has her on edge, as the underlying suggestion of: he was fast enough *this time*.

"Hey."

Felicity jerks at the sound of Oliver's soft voice. Her eyes fly to his with a quiet, "Hmm?" in an attempt to hide what she's thinking. Because now is so not the time. But he must see everything written all over her face, because he squeezes her hand gently. She squeezes back, smiling… but he still doesn't move.

Instead he gives her a smile, a smile that's just for her… and then he winks. It's so out of the blue and unexpected that it makes Felicity snort under her breath in a laugh. It works, bringing a levity to the entire situation that wasn't there before.

That feeling disappears the second he opens the door.

"Ollie! Oliver! Can you tell us what happened to Laurel Lance? Was

she attacked at your house? Did someone break in?"

"What do you have to say about your ex-girlfriend being stabbed at your home? Did it have anything to do with Felicity or Mayor Queen?"

"Where has your family been this last week, Ollie? Someone attacked your family business and now your ex-girlfriend is in surgery from a stab wound - does it involve Mayor Queen? What about Felicity Smoak, what about the little girl Lily? What aren't you telling us?"

The din outside the car is astounding, and incredibly overwhelming. The only way Felicity manages to get out of the car is because Oliver is there to guide her, his grip on her hand never wavering as he steps into the fray, urging her to follow.

He turns, nodding his head towards Diggle and Ellie, telling Frank to stay with them.

It leaves just her and Oliver versus the press, the rest of their group following in their wake.

The media is *relentless*. It's like they're working together as one giant wave, coming at them in surges, their voices growing louder and louder.

Someone shouts Felicity's name and she makes the mistake of looking up. She regrets it instantly when a series of flashes go off in her face, leaving spots dancing all over her vision. She makes a noise of distress - mostly because she *hates* that feeling, those cornea-blazing circles that don't go away - and Oliver instantly pulls her closer, tugging her closer as he moves forward until she's at his side. He wraps his arm around her waist, pushing his other out in front of them to keep the crowd at bay.

The shouts grow louder, all of them asking essentially the same thing, another thing they're all seemingly working together on. Somehow the events of the past few weeks have been linked together in a huge Queen family conspiracy.

If *only* it were that easy.

The walk feels endless, although it can't possibly be taking longer than a minute. But it's the longest minute ever. Felicity's assaulted with sounds from every side, and not just what they're saying - it's the clash of equipment, bags rustling, people inadvertently brushing against her jacket, against Oliver's. And *God*, she's so much more aware of the

smells. Like, she smells everything, and what might have been nice smells on their own become truly horrible when combined with the others. It's remnants of people's breakfast in their clothes, cologne, hints of the grass someone mowed, shampoos, and the slightly battery-acid-y smell of a few people using film *and* digital cameras. Like the image aesthetics of this made-up conspiracy matter enough to use old-school film.

She glances back every few steps to check on Ellie. Frank and Diggle have formed a cocoon around her, both of their faces promising something very murder-y if anyone gets too close. Ellie's face is buried in Diggle's jacket, one of his large arms cradling her to his chest, the other warding people off, helping Frank keep a wide berth around her.

But it's not her they're interested in this time.

No, it's Oliver, and by extension Felicity.

Oliver leans in close, his voice soothing as he promises, "We're almost there."

Felicity nods and he pulls her flush against him, his stride slowing to match hers so they're walking together. They're in-sync, a team, just as they are in everything, whether in the face of a physical threat, or the verbal assault of this moment.

One of the reporters steps in their path, a stodgy guy with a camera the size of his head who walks backwards as they press on. She feels Oliver's frustration mounting in the way his grip tightens on her waist as his other hand moves to urge the guy further away. The reporter doesn't take the hint. He's pushing boundaries, getting too close and too invasive, but he also isn't overtly doing anything different than the other reporters.

But then his flash goes off again.

It shouldn't be any different - there are dozens of cameras around them - but it is. Maybe it's the angle or the brightness or the camera itself, but *something* changes because the instant the light hits Felicity's eyes, the world starts spinning. It's like someone pulled the carpet out from under her feet and suddenly the ground is the sky and the sky is the ground. Her face instantly gets hot, a near overwhelming sense of nausea hitting her.

She abruptly stops, swaying. If not for Oliver's arm around her, she would have fallen.

"Felicity?" Oliver stops with her, completely ignoring the crowd of reporters, his focus honing entirely in on her. "Honey, are you okay?"

"I, uh…" She clings to his arm, her eyes shutting as she nods hard, her other hand covering her mouth. She can *feel* the blood draining from her face and some part of her vaguely realizes the shots these reporters are taking are going to be extremely unflattering, but the thought disappears a second later because when she opens her eyes, she still wants to fall over.

"Felicity?"

She turns into him, nodding again as she says, "I'm okay... I think."

That has Oliver furrowing his brow. He pulls her even closer, his other hand settling against her stomach. It's soothing, even if it does nothing for the sickness threatening to crawl up her throat.

"Felicity?"

She peeks open her eyes to look at him, only him, and finds heavy concern staring back at her.

The world slowly disappears, leaving just them. The noise winds down, the flashes fading.

She can finally *breathe*.

It's grounding, fortifying, and for a moment she *does* feel better as they make their own little calm in the middle of the storm.

But then the storm surge hits.

"Are you *pregnant*?"

The words slice the calm to ribbons.

Felicity's head whips around toward the reporter who asked. It's not just one though, it's *all* of them. They've caught the scent of a story and they're absolutely going to cling to that with everything they have. Everyone stops, their eyes on Felicity, *waiting*. The bubble of anticipation has her nausea coming back triple-fold Felicity just stares at the wall of press around them. Oliver isn't any better where he practically clings to her, just as shocked as she is by the question.

"W-what?" she asks, because she feels the compulsion to respond, but also can't form actual words.

It does nothing in the least to dissuade anything.

The roar of questions *explodes* and the flashbulbs start up again.

Felicity's frozen. Some part of her is very aware that the hospital is just a few feet away, that the media won't follow them past the sliding doors, but she can't move.

The wave of reporters surge closer and she does the only thing she can think to do. She grips the sleeve of Oliver's jacket, turning into him, seeking refuge.

"Oliver…"

Whatever he hears in her tone jolts him back into action, his protectiveness instantly redoubling.

"Back off," he snaps at the closest reporters. There's enough gravity to his words that they actually do; one of them drops his camera in surprise, others blanch slightly. He completely ignores them, tilting his head towards Felicity, putting his mouth near her ear and in a low voice asking, "Are you okay? Can you walk? Do you need me to carry you?"

The very last thing she wants is a picture of him carrying her into the hospital plastered across every newspaper in the country with a headline that reads "Royal Brood Expanding?" And she *can* walk, even if she's unsteady, so she shakes her head.

"No…" she replies. "No, I'll manage." She says it with as much certainty as she can, as if that alone might actually give her the steadiness to follow through. Fake it 'til you make it, right? That might not actually apply in this case - willpower alone likely isn't enough to alleviate pregnancy symptoms - but she's sure as hell gonna try. "Let's just get in there."

Diggle closes in on the other side of her, one of his hands on her elbow, ready to lend support. Ellie's still in his arms with her face buried in his jacket, but her little fingers grab onto Felicity's sleeve. She can't tell if Ellie's looking for comfort or trying to help her - maybe both - but either way it's heartwarming and it boosts Felicity's resolve, powering her at least as much as Oliver and Digg's support.

The reporters only want more when they see it and their invasive questions get louder.

Oliver growls something under his breath, his fingers digging into Felicity's side. She can feel his agitation and anger growing with each halted step, especially when they close in even more around them, but he maintains. She knows judging by the way he's starting to shake slightly that he'd rather punch the reporters in the face than deal with this any longer, but he doesn't. And she's glad, she's very glad, even if she kind of wants him to.

"Are you two getting married?"

"How does the mayor feel about this? What's next?"

"What happens with Lily?"

Oliver suddenly stands up taller. He partially shields Felicity as pulls them to a stop, raising his voice to finally address them.

"We're here to check on our friend who was very badly hurt," he announces. "I get that you're curious, that there's a lot that's happened in a short span of time involving my family, but we aren't going to be answering questions about anything today. I would suggest you call my mother's chief-of-staff if you need information for a legitimate news story."

That doesn't stop them, of course. Having gotten a response - any response - is more than enough to fuel them. But with that statement made, Oliver shuts them out completely. It's like a switch turns off, like they aren't even there to him anymore. Instead, all his focus is on her. Felicity's not sure how he does it. She supposes she'll learn. She *hopes* she'll learn, because this is too much, even with Frank also stepping between her little family and the bulk of the reporters, using his body to block their cameras.

Ultimately, she manages to walk under her own power, but it feels like her feet barely hit the pavement, with Oliver, Digg and Ellie all providing their own kinds of support.

"Momma," Ellie says, her voice tiny compared to the din, "why are they so scary and mean?"

Considering the kinds of things that Ellie's faced down lately, it says *a lot* that it's reporters she calls 'scary and mean.'

"They'll be gone in a minute, baby," Felicity reassures her. "They can't go in the hospital."

It's true, but only for right now, she realizes. They'll be gone for the immediate future, but what about when she and Oliver leave the hospital? What about tomorrow and the next day? The next *week?* The next year? The next *twenty*? Because she *is* pregnant. She's forever tied to this family and the media storm that surrounds it. And, with everything else going on, she hasn't really had time to process that yet.

But she has time for that. *Later*. Because she's getting a reprieve now and she needs to focus on that.

As they finally pass through the sliding glass doors, Felicity takes a huge breath of relief.

The silence that follows as the doors close is jarring.

It comes back a second later when four security guards run out to handle the reporters.

Oliver leads her to a cushy-looking armchair in the lobby, saying, "Sit down for a minute."

Some part of her is grateful it's not a wheelchair, because imagine *that* money shot. The reporters may still be outside, but the walls are made of glass. Even with Frank continuing to physically block many of the shots, the intrusive media remains a problem.

When Felicity sits down, the world starts spinning again.

"Whoa," she says, grabbing the armrests. A sweep of nausea rolls through her again and she groans. "Oh…"

Oliver crouches in front of her. "Put your head between your knees, honey," he suggests, rubbing his hands on her thighs. His touch is soothing and warm and it grounds her, just like it did outside.

But his solution is a hard *no*.

"Mm," Felicity says, shaking her head. "Nope. Not with all…" She waves her fingers at the reporters. "That." She doesn't want to offer them any more fodder than they already have. She can only imagine what her face looked like when they'd asked what they had. They don't need more. Still, when she tries to sit up again, trying to look perky, it doesn't work. Another wave of nausea crashes through her. "Okay, maybe a little bit," she adds, resting her elbows on her knees, leaning her head into her hands.

"Do you need anything? Crackers? Water?"

"No," she insists, grabbing his hand where it's resting on her thigh. "I'm okay." And it's true. It is passing, slowly but surely. Felicity looks up at him, soaking in the concern etched into his features. The ache he has to make things better, to help her, is so very visible. It has her reaching up to touch the side of his face. She runs her fingers through the scruff along his jawline. "Really, Oliver. The dizziness is passing. I'm okay."

"You're sure?"

Felicity nods. "Yes. I'm sure."

He narrows his eyes, trying to gauge the truth of her words, but he must decide that she means it because a wash of relief falls across his face, his brow unfurrowing as his shoulders relax. He rubs his hands up and down her thighs, needing the touch as much as she does.

"Are you better, Momma?" Ellie asks from where Diggle still holds her. "Did you get hurt?"

The anxiety on her daughter's face is far too reminiscent of her father's. Felicity can't let that stand. She reaches out her arms for her.

With a gentle smile, Diggle hands her over.

"I'm fine, Ellie-bug," Felicity reassures her, pulling her onto her lap. "The baby just made me feel a little sick for a minute. I'm okay now."

"Oh." Ellie nods, like this makes total sense to her. "Like before. You did lots of coughing in the potty then." She makes a face as she adds, "It was yucky."

Felicity chuckles, pulling Ellie closer. "It totally is," she agrees.

Ellie pulls back to shake her finger at Felicity's stomach. "Be nicer to Momma, baby!"

And, well… Felicity looks up just in time to see more than one camera capturing the moment before Frank steps in front of the remaining crowd again. There's not nearly as many as before, but there's still enough. And while they're far away enough from the windows that seeing anything clearly is questionable, all the press really needs is a *hint*. And they're getting it. As cute as it is, if the reporters hadn't already been fully convinced she was pregnant, Felicity's pretty sure

Ellie just gave it away. Again.

"Crap," she whispers. Although really, what kind of hospital had open windows like this?

"That's a bad word, Momma," Ellie advises, pulling her attention back to the bundle in her arms where she's wrapping her fingers in the lapel of Felicity's coat.

"Yeah, Mommy," Oliver says quietly, squeezing her knee. Felicity shoots him a look - because *really* - and his only reply is to wink at her before he looks at Ellie. He smoothes his hand over her hair, never letting go of Felicity as he adds, "Mommy's just making sure we're safe, that's all."

"But you're here, Daddy," the little girls says. The simple matter-of-fact way she says it has Felicity's chest tightening, especially when she sees Oliver's face softening. Ellie nods, turning to watch her own fingers as she twists Felicity's jacket. "You keep the mean people away. And Uncle Digg. And Frank!"

Diggle chuckles behind them as Oliver smiles at her. "Anything for my girls."

"All three of us!" Ellie says, her face brightening as she pats Felicity's stomach. "We're all your girls!"

The last few flashes tell Felicity *that* was another good shot. She looks up in time to see the guards urging the last of them away. She blows out a soft sigh, her shoulders dropping slightly. She'd have some clean-up work to do later, that's for sure. The thought of doing something so simple sounds amazing though. Seeking out unwanted photographs and their owners is a task she vastly prefers over looking for lunatic mad men.

Frank makes his way over, stopping at Diggle's side long enough to say he's going to move the car and that when they're ready, he'll pick them up at the service entrance on the east side of the building.

"The west side's better," Oliver interrupts, glancing back at them. "More coverage over there."

With a nod and a quiet, "You got it," Frank jogs back out of the entrance.

"Hey," she says, looking at Oliver. He's still crouched at her knee, so

close she can feel his warmth. "You should go see Laurel."

Oliver's face instantly tightens and she can see the 'no' on his lips before he's even formed the thought. He doesn't want to leave her side, not just yet. She knows the feeling, mostly because she doesn't want him to go, but the sooner he visits Laurel, the sooner they can leave. And that sounds like an even more incredibly attractive idea with each passing second.

"Really," Felicity says, touching his cheek before wrapping her arms around Ellie. "We'll be fine. It's not me and Ellie she'll want to see anyhow. And John will be with us."

Oliver hesitates. He looks to Digg and then back at her and Ellie. He's so obviously torn. There's no doubt in the least that his loyalty and his heart are with her and Ellie, but she knows that he needs to see Laurel, too, for his own reasons. He blames himself for her attack. It was his sister. He'd been just outside the room. He'd unknowingly led Laurel into a situation that put her in very grave danger. He can't *not* visit her right now and it's not even just because she could probably use the well wishes, but because he needs to reassure himself that she's okay… or that she will be okay and she doesn't blame him.

Felicity really hopes she doesn't because she cannot imagine how *that* would go.

"We'll be *fine*," she stresses, cupping the side of his neck. Her thumb brushes his jawline. "We're in the hospital. We're protected. The media is gone… *Go*. Get this over with."

After another moment, he finally relents. "Alright." Oliver kisses Ellie's forehead before cupping Felicity's cheeks and pressing a soft kiss to her lips. "Alright, but if you need *anything*-"

"Digg's here," Felicity reminds him. "And I'd be surprised if Laurel's visiting hours were long. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's just your Queen name that's getting you through the door right now. But that'll only go so far, mister, so get a move on. We'll barely notice you're gone."

That's a blatant lie and they both know it, but it doesn't change anything.

Oliver sighs, a grim line marring his face before he nods and kisses her again. He lingers, trying to hold onto the moment, to her, and she smiles against the press of his lips. She chuckles as he groans when they part.

"John…" he starts, giving his friend a weighty look.

"Get your ass up there," Diggle interrupts. "I can get her crackers too, you know. I do have a little experience with morning sickness."

With a conceding snort, Oliver nods. He glances at Felicity, running his hand through Ellie's hair once more… and he still doesn't leave.

"The sooner you go, the sooner you get back here," Felicity urges.

He nods again with a soft, "Yeah," as he looks at Ellie before finally standing up, reluctantly stepping away, stopping only to clap Diggle solidly on the shoulder. "If you need anything…"

"I'll hack the PA and page you," Felicity replies for him. An amused smirk and raised eyebrows greet her and she falters slightly. "Or… call your cell phone. That might be simpler. Huh. Hacking the hospital PA actually made sense in my head at first. Is pregnancy brain a real thing? Why did that make sense?"

Oliver huffs out a laugh and shakes his head. "I'll be quick," he says, kissing the top of her head. He casts one last affectionate glance at Felicity and Ellie before tearing himself away and heading toward a waiting elevator. He looks back before stepping on. She and Ellie give him little waves, making him grin before he disappears from view.

"Really, though," Felicity says, looking up at Digg. "Is crazy a component of pregnancy?"

"Pretty sure Lyla's got a book or twelve you could borrow about symptoms if you want them," Digg says. The reality of actual *books* on pregnancy suddenly hits her. Because she's pregnant. Which she knows because she'd just been buried under a wall of nausea outside, but *reading* about it suddenly feels entirely different. The uncertainty about pregnancy and all it entails - nevermind the whole baby part of things because she has yet to process any part of having an actual infant she's responsible for - must show on her face because Digg's voice drops as he offers her a soft smile. "You can talk to her too, you know."

"Yeah," Felicity agrees absently. "And I will. I will. I just… I guess I haven't had the time yet. Or I haven't *taken* the time yet. But I will."

"Good," Digg affirms.

"Momma?" Ellie asks, tugging on Felicity's shirt sleeve and drawing

her attention. Her eyes dart past Felicity's shoulder and for a second Felicity wonders if some over-enthusiastic reporter has snuck into the hospital lobby. When she turns though, all she sees is the hospital gift shop.

"What is it, Ellie-bug?"

"Could we buy a present?"

Felicity blinks. Ellie doesn't ask for much - mostly because her grandmothers have spoiled her at every turn with candy and toys that seem to show up daily - so she's a little thrown by the question.

"Uh… For you?" she asks.

Ellie shakes her head. "*From* me, not *for* me," she corrects.

That clarifies absolutely nothing.

"For Laurel then?" Felicity ventures.

"No," Ellie says. "For the baby in your belly."

Felicity stills at that, soaking in the sight of Ellie's hopeful little face as she fidgets on her lap.

The very idea of it hits her right in the hormones. The thought of her daughters running around, playing together, running the fairy castle in tandem, whispering secrets in each other's ears late at night when they should be asleep…

It's so very clear in her mind's eye.

For all of her nerves about pregnancy and dealing with an infant, this balances it. Absolutely.

"Yeah," she agrees after a moment, her voice a little choked. "Okay." She smiles, tucking stray hairs behind Ellie's ear. "I think that's a really great idea."

Ellie brightens, sitting up taller. "Can we go now?"

"Do you want me to take her?" Diggle offers before Felicity can reply.

"No, I think I'm good now," Felicity replies, and she is. Her stomach is still on the cusp of being problematic, but nothing is threatening to come up, so she puts that in the win column. Felicity lifts Ellie up,

setting her on the floor before standing. The room isn't spinning and her legs don't feel like they're going to stop working all of a sudden. All very good things. "Alright," she announces, taking Ellie's hand. "Do you know what you want to get the baby?"

"A teddy bear," Ellie says as they make their way to the shop. "Or a lion. Or a dolphin. Or a monkey."

Diggle grins where he trails behind them.

"She'll have the whole animal kingdom by the time she's here," Felicity says, only vaguely noticing that she referred to the baby as a 'she.'

They enter the gift shop and Ellie makes a beeline for the shelf of stuffed animals in the corner.

Felicity lets her go, standing back as the little girl peruses the selection. It leaves Felicity to do… absolutely nothing. Which leaves her feeling annoyingly fidget-y. Without Ellie or Oliver to focus on, her thoughts suddenly take on a life of their own - about what happens next, about babies and futures and reporters and homicidal tendencies in family members, about all the fun emotions that go with that. For the first time in a long time, she really wouldn't mind a distraction.

She looks back to find Diggle glancing around, his gaze calculating before he looks toward where the reporters had been.

"So," she says, pulling his attention to her. She waves at the shop around them. "Should we get a balloon for Laurel? Or flowers? Or a… I don't know. A *something*. It's not like they make a 'Sorry you got stabbed by my slightly-deranged future sister-in-law, get well soon' t-shirt. And oh *wow*, there's so much going on in that sentence."

"She's probably not very awake right now to appreciate it anyway," Digg replies. That's not the answer she wanted. He must see that on her face because sympathy shades his eyes. "That's for later, Felicity. Especially because you have that little one to focus on at the moment." He nods at Ellie before giving another nod at Felicity's midsection. "And that little one, too. You're doing everything you can for Laurel right now. And besides, you already got Oliver here. You got him calm." She levels him with a look and he gives her a half-shrug with a wry smile. "Calm-*er*, anyhow. And you'll support Sara in any way you can. Detective Lance, too. Don't worry about Laurel. You've got enough on your plate."

"You're right," Felicity says with a nod. But it still sits uneasily in her stomach. Which doesn't really help with the nausea. Rubbing her midsection, she steps closer towards a pile of festive looking flower pots and oddly enough, actual fans. She picks one up, setting it down a second later because why would anyone think that's a good 'get well soon' gift? Felicity sighs, annoyed with herself. "I know what she needs right now is time and doctors. And luck. Lots of luck. Luck is always good with these sorts of things." She bites her lip, staring at a rack of cards. "I still feel like I should get… *something*."

"Then get her something," Diggle says with a shrug.

With a huff, Felicity asks, "But what?" He shrugs again and she narrows her eyes at him, because she knows that shrug is deceptive. "You're not being very helpful."

"Why are you suddenly so hellbent on getting her something?"

"Because she got stabbed, John," she replies a little caustically. "That seems gift-worthy. And…"

"And…?"

And because she feels oddly… guilty. That makes her pause. That's a large part of it. Not all of it, but it's part of it. And it's not guilt that it happened, although she hates that it did at all. No, it's guilt that she's glad it happened to her and not to Ellie. To her. To Oliver.

She's pretty sure that makes her a horrible person. So yes, *guilt*.

"I just want to get her something," Felicity says, her voice small as she toys with the tag of a small statue of circus animals.

"I've got it, Momma!" Ellie interrupts.

Felicity turns to see her hurrying back towards her as fast as her little feet will take her. She nearly trips on the cheap hospital carpet in her haste. Before Felicity can tell her to slow down, she rights herself, not pausing for an instant. She barrels forward, cradling a stuffed animal carefully in her arms as though it's both precious and breakable. It's silly. It's *so* silly, because the thing is just fabric and fluff, but Ellie's treating it like it's a piece of fine china.

She can't help but smile as she crouches down to meet her daughter. "What'd you find?"

Ellie presents the stuffed animal with flourish. "It's an *elephant*, Momma!" she declares, her whole face beaming with pride and excitement. "From me! Ellie! So it's Ellie the Elephant!" Even if Felicity hadn't decided to buy her whatever she'd wanted to get for the baby, that look would have convinced her. It's pure joy and so very giving. It's Ellie, in a nutshell. The toddler bounces the stuffed animal, making the ears flap. "Look at his ears, Momma! He can fly!"

"He's perfect," Felicity replies, tugging on the trunk. "I love him." Ellie positively beams at that, her pleased eyes taking in the elephant again. Felicity doesn't even think as she adds, "Do you want to get another one? So you and the baby can each have one. A matching set of Ellie the Elephants?"

That has Ellie's eyes widening, her lips forming a perfect 'o' as she lets out an excited, "Ooh!" before she breaks into a blinding grin. "Yeah! Then I can show the baby how to treat her elephant nicely!" She scrambles back toward the stuffed animal display with a skip in her step, whispering under her breath about finding the *perfect* elephant. As if any of them are different.

Digg coughs under his breath, giving Felicity a knowing look with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" Felicity asks. When he just shakes his head, she adds, "It's just a stuffed animal." He merely hums under his breath, nodding with pursed lips. "It is."

He shrugs. "If you say so."

"I just want her to have…" Felicity's words fade. She needs to be doing *something*, that's all, and if she can't do something for Laurel, then she's going to do something for Ellie. With a defeated sigh, she says, "Okay, yeah, we both know what I'm doing right now. Although it isn't *just* that."

"Yeah, well," Diggle says. "That is one easy-going little girl there. And lightning doesn't strike twice, if you know what I mean. You'd be hard pressed to find another kid as well-behaved as she is."

Some little voice in the back of her head tells her maybe they're just that good at parenting. Maybe it's genetics. Maybe their next one will be every bit as wonderfully well-behaved as Ellie. She wants to believe that. It's possible, anyhow.

"I'm not being a pushover." When he just blinks, she adds, "I'm not. I'm

treating my girls to matching stuffed animals, John. Believe me, this is at least as much for me as it is for Ellie."

Digg hums at that as Ellie trots back. She has an elephant under each arm and a wide grin on her face.

"They're sisters, too!" Ellie declares, holding them out for her mother to see. She's so very proud and Felicity's heart melts at the sight of it. So… okay, yeah maybe she *is* a bit of a pushover. "Just like me and the baby!"

"It's perfect," Felicity agrees. Ellie gives her a satisfied nod, grinning down at the elephants. "How about we pay for these Ellie the Elephants and go wait for your daddy?"

"Okay." Ellie's all grins as Felicity picks her and the elephants up, adding, "I can't wait to show daddy. We can play safari together!"

"I bet he'll love that," Felicity replies. Because he will. She has no doubt that Oliver will spend the next several hours playing safari with their daughter. Probably in the pillow castle that has somehow survived the last few weeks.

The store is empty and it's not long before the elephants are paid for and they find themselves back out in the lobby. The hospital is remarkably calm, although being nowhere near the emergency room entrance helps with that. It's just them in a small grouping of chairs as they wait for Oliver.

Ellie busies herself with the elephants, taking them on that imaginary safari across the end tables. Rather, *over* the end tables and across all the chairs, because in this safari all the animals can fly. Felicity watches on, checking her phone periodically for any updates from Oliver, looking to Diggle for the same. There's nothing, which she takes as a good sign.

She doesn't pay attention to the time. It doesn't really matter. She's more interested in watching Ellie and playing along when the toddler's in need of other animals on this safari, but it eventually occurs to Felicity that the sun's direction has changed where it's slanted across the floor, telling her it's at least been an hour.

A few minutes later, a certain set of footsteps has her looking up in time to see Oliver wandering back to them.

He's *drained*. His shoulders are slumped, his head bowed with an

exhaustion that has nothing to do with his physical well-being. The emotional tax of his visit with Laurel is obvious. Felicity's honestly not sure if it's because her prognosis is worse than they'd been led to believe, or because something else happened over the last hour.

Either way, the minute he spies Ellie, some of that lifts. It's not gone, but it's offset by a mixture of curiosity and such open affection that it makes Felicity smile. It will always amaze her how much change Ellie brings out in him.

When he looks at her, their eyes meeting for that split second before he reaches them, she sees more of it lifting off his shoulders. Felicity feels a very specific sort of pride filling her that she can do that for him. If a look can do that, what will a hug do? So much more, and she stands up to do just that.

"Hey," Oliver says when he's finally close enough, just as Felicity says, "Hey you."

"Daddy!" Ellie greets him in a bright, probably way too loud voice. She runs over to him, carrying the elephants. Felicity and Diggle trail behind as Oliver crouches down to Ellie's level. "Look, Daddy, look! I got Ellies! One for me and one for my sister, 'cause they're sisters, too! Isn't that cool?"

Oh, he's putty in her little hands at her explanation. Oliver stares at her and then the elephants, his face clouded with emotion. He takes a deep, cleansing breath, reaching out to pat the heads of the stuffed animals.

"That is the best thing I've heard all day, Ellie-bug," he says, his voice thick. "I love that."

"Me too!" She looks back to the elephants, straightening their ears and stroking down their trunks. "They're *perfect*."

"They are," Oliver agrees.

The silent 'just like you' echoes in his voice.

He slowly becomes more settled as he watches Ellie tend to the elephants. She grounds him, bringing him full circle to the lesson she's been teaching them the entire time she's been here. It's *these* moments that count, snatching up all the little things in-between the big moments. Seeing someone he loves and who's been in his life for as long as he can remember nearly die has probably helped cement that.

Oliver stares at Ellie with such wonder in his eyes.

Felicity's hand finds his shoulders, a tiny smile on her lips as she says, "Hey."

Oliver instantly looks up at her, his face softening in a whole new way as he lets out a heavy sigh before surging back to his feet with his own quiet, "Hey." She doesn't miss the way he flinches when he puts pressure on his knee, but it suddenly doesn't matter because he doesn't waste a second before pulling her into his arms. Felicity wraps him up in her embrace as he digs his face into her neck, curling in around her, pulling her flush against him. Oliver instantly relaxes against her. She was right, about the hug. She can *feel* the tension draining out of him.

"How is she?" Felicity whispers.

He pauses, and that tells her everything she needs to know.

"She's… better," Oliver answers, pulling back. The lines around his face are still tight. "Still touch and go. She was awake though, when I was up there." She waits for more - because there is so much more, she can see it in his eyes - but it's clear that's all she's going to get. Oliver smiles at her before glancing at Digg. "Let's get out of here."

Diggle nods, pulling out his phone to call Frank.

"Can we play safari when we get home?" Ellie asks him. Oliver and Felicity look down at her. "Momma said you'd play and we gotta play it at home because all the zebras and lions are there and it's only a real safari when the lions can play with the elephants."

Oliver chuckles, the lines around his eyes disappearing as he nods. "We can definitely do that when we get home."

"But first," Felicity interrupts. "We should get you some lunch. How does that sound?"

Ellie perks up, her attention firmly on her mother. "Dinosaur chicken nuggets?"

"If you'll eat some carrots, too," Felicity replies.

The toddler wrinkles her nose at that. She ducks her head, grumbling something that Felicity doesn't quite catch under her breath before she nods. Oliver chuckles next to her and Felicity elbows him gently. It's a tiny victory, but it's a win nonetheless, even if it's something as

unhealthy as chicken nuggets. Though the dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets are oddly delicious, so she can't blame Ellie for that choice.

"See?" Felicity asks, keeping her voice low just for Oliver. "I've got this mommying thing down. She's gonna eat carrots and we didn't even have to fight about it this time."

"You should get a gold star," Oliver replies cheekily.

"I should," Felicity says, wrinkling her nose at him. He returns it wholeheartedly, further lightening the mood. "C'mere."

They only have time for a quick, chaste kiss before Diggle's clearing his throat.

"Frank's ready for us," the other man says.

"Alright," Oliver says, letting Felicity go to scoop Ellie up into his arms, along with the elephants. "Let's go."

"Here, Momma," Ellie says, leaning over Oliver's shoulder as they head towards where Frank waits for them. She holds out one of the stuffed animals for Felicity to take. "You hold sister's."

"Okay." Felicity can't help but grin down at the silly little thing before nodding to Ellie. "I've got it."

"Keep him safe," Ellie instructs with a nod. The fact that 'Ellie the Elephant' is apparently a male makes Felicity grin even more.

"I will," Felicity says, snuggling the stuffed animal just like Ellie is. "I promise."

The walk to the service entrance is uneventful. Felicity isn't sure what to expect when they leave, but it's not the empty driveway, the only thing present being Frank standing next to the limo, waiting for them. The hospital security did a great job clearing out the reporter riff-raff, or were at least successful in keeping them away. That's what Felicity thinks, at least, until Frank mentions he asked the security team to create a bit more hoopla on the other side of the building, effectively drawing the media sharks to fake blood.

"You're a hero, Frank," Felicity says, patting the ARGUS agent's arm gratefully. "Thank you."

Frank tips his head in acknowledgement with an amused smile and

what Felicity thinks might be blushing.

It's only when they settle into the quiet car that Felicity finally lets herself relax. As Ellie scrambles to sit next to Diggle again, Felicity lets out a heavy sigh of relief. She sinks into her seat as they buckle in, Frank already pulling away from the hospital.

She hears Oliver and Diggle talking about something, but it fades from her awareness.

The only thing she's aware of is the soft sound of her daughter talking to herself, the words shifting into trumpeting sounds as she marches her elephant across her lap. Sometimes it lands on Diggle's leg before it flies back over to Ellie's side. Felicity watches her with a small smile, holding the second Ellie the Elephant in her lap with one hand, her other running up and down Oliver's arm in a repetitive, calming motion.

She thinks she might suggest a nap after lunch. Oh, that sounds delightful. Ellie would probably fight her on that, but if Oliver's on board? If all of them crawl into bed for a quick mid-afternoon nap? She thinks she might win her daughter over. Ellie has a hard time saying no to cocoon time.

"Can I have a banana, too?" Ellie asks as Frank turns down the long driveway leading straight up to the manor. She sits up taller, looking to her parents. "I'm super hungry. And…" Ellie pauses, and the most angelic look crosses her face as she looks to Oliver. "Can I have chocolate milk, too?"

Felicity barely keeps herself from snorting as the car rolls to a stop in front of the mansion. She undoes her buckle and moves to get Ellie free.

"Yes to the banana," she replies, "but no to the chocolate milk."

She shoots Oliver a look that clearly tells him, '*This is a thing we are going to be unified on.*' He nods, pressing his lips together to keep his amusement at bay. His eyebrows go up in a show of innocence though, and it makes her roll her eyes at him. They both know if it was just him, he'd cave.

Ellie huffs in annoyance, her lips twisting in a pout. But she doesn't argue. No, instead she barters. "Can I have chocolate milk with dinner, then?"

Oliver can't keep back his chuckle in this time.

"Let's see how the carrot situation goes," Felicity says, helping Ellie out of her seat. She pats the toddler on the butt, urging her out of the car. "Out with you."

They all climb out of the limo.

When Ellie's feet touch the ground, she suddenly blurts, "Wait, Frank!" before spinning to look up at Felicity. She holds up her free hand. "Momma, can I see sister's Ellie the Elephant? I want to show Frank!"

Felicity's not sure *when* Ellie and Frank had the time to spend a quality few minutes together, but it also doesn't really surprise her at the same time. Ellie is a natural ball of sunshine, and it's near-impossible to be around her and not be totally taken with her. That much is obvious when Felicity glances at the man in question and sees him smiling, nodding that he'll stay for a moment before taking the limo back to the garage.

"Okay," Felicity says, handing her the elephant. "Go crazy."

Ellie darts off towards Frank, leaving her, Diggle and Oliver.

Diggle smiles, watching Ellie for an amused second before looking back at them. He twirls his finger as he says, "I'm gonna do a lap around the grounds. Make sure none of the press decided to follow us back here."

"Thank you," Oliver replies, the sincerity ringing in his voice.

"Of course," Digg says, gripping Oliver's shoulder and squeezing Felicity's arm before he heads off.

They watch him for a moment as he makes his way along the edge of the manor before he turns, disappearing from sight. And then it's just them, and the sound of Ellie's happy chatter interspersed with Frank's patient questions about flying elephants.

"Okay," Felicity says, looking up at Oliver. She steps closer, resting her hands on his chest. He smiles down at her, his hands finding her waist before he slides them up where he rubs her arms in a soothing up-and-down motion. "How's Laurel really?"

His hands stop. That is clearly not what he thought she was going to say. Pain and guilt twist his face as he ducks his head, taking a slow

breath. When he meets her eyes again, he lets her see everything.

"She's… as fine as she can be," Oliver says, his voice muted. "But it could change any minute. They said the next twenty-four hours are critical, because the arrow… because it did so much damage. They repaired most of it, but it's…" He sighs, his hands slowly moving again. "It could just change. But she is okay. For right now."

"That's good," Felicity says.

"She was awake," he continues, "when I was up there. For a little bit at least. She was still pretty out of it and it was hard for her to talk because the arrow got her kidney, nicked that vein and pierced her lung. She shouldn't have been talking at all, but she... she…" Oliver shakes his head, a small incredulous smile tugging at his lips as his gaze drops to where he rubs her arms. "She was asking about Blood, of all things. And Thea. She could barely take a breath, but she wanted to make sure Thea was okay. She said she should've known, going in there. She… she just wanted to make sure Thea was okay."

"Of course she did," Felicity replies, angling her head to catch his eye. "She loves Thea."

"Yeah. She does." His smile fades into a quiet agony that makes her insides twists. "Sara… she told her dad it was Slade who…" His voice trails off and he shakes his head at himself for his inability to finish. "She covered for Thea. She didn't even mention her name. She said it was all Slade."

"Oliver," Felicity starts. "That's…"

"She didn't say much else to me though," Oliver interrupts, the words coming out in a heavy croak. "She's… I think she blames me."

Felicity stands up taller at that.

"It's not your fault, Oliver," she says, sliding her hands up to his cheeks. She cups his face, urging him to meet her gaze again. "You know that, right? Please tell me you know that."

Oliver nods, whispering, "I know," as he slides his hands up her arms to her wrists. He doesn't try to move her hands though. He just holds her as she holds him. "I know that." He sounds almost like he believes it, or at least like he knows she believes it. "I'm not sure Sara does, though."

"She'll figure it out," Felicity says. "She will. She needs time to heal. Just like Laurel does."

The only response he can muster is a smile. It reaches his eyes though, which she takes as a win.

Felicity pushes up onto her toes, pulling on his face to tug him closer. The kiss is soft and brief, a promise that while things aren't exactly as they should be right now, they will be. Because they have to be. When they pull back, Oliver sighs, leaning his forehead against hers.

The sound of Ellie's shoes on the ground pulls them back to the moment.

"Frank thinks the elephants are *awesome*," Ellie gushes, beaming up at her parents. "And he says he wishes he could fly, because he'd fly with them all the time."

"That's neat," Felicity says as Oliver waves to Frank, who waves in return. "I could totally see Frank sprouting some wings and flying around." Felicity leans down and Oliver's hand never leaves her back as she scoops Ellie up into her arms, elephants and all. "How about we go eat some lunch, Ellie-bug?"

"Okay."

"And then maybe a nap," Felicity tacks on as they walk towards the house.

Displeasure has Ellie making a face as she shakes her head. "I'm not tired, Momma."

"Well I am," Felicity replies under her breath, making Oliver smile as he unlocks the front door. He lets them in first and catches up as Felicity makes her way to the kitchen, wrapping his arm around her waist, adding, "I think a nap sounds great."

"See?" Felicity says. "I think we should all take a nap."

Ellie sighs in such a dramatic fashion that she actually gets heavier in Felicity's arms as they enter the kitchen. But it's not the fact that her future includes a nap that has her sighing. It's…

"Do I really have to eat carrots, Momma?"

"Yep," Felicity replies cheerfully. She tosses her purse onto the kitchen

island, moving towards the fridge as Oliver shrugs out of his jacket. Felicity takes one of the elephants, planning on using it to help her get Ellie to eat as she says, "We both think carrots are-"

A shrill, ear-splitting alarm cuts her off.

Felicity jumps, nearly dropping Ellie, a startled scream slipping from her lips. Her heart leaps into her throat as a surge of fear and adrenaline slam into her. They flood her system, leaving her reeling as she spins to face the room, her eyes wide, all the blood draining from her face.

Time seems to slow down in that split second as she looks to Oliver. He's moving towards her, shouting something, but she can't hear him. The screaming sound pierces her senses, taking over everything save for Ellie's frightened shouts for her father as she's suddenly clinging to Felicity with everything she has.

A bright red blinking draws her eyes down to her daughter.

The tachyon detector.

"Oh God!" Felicity shouts, panic infusing the words, but her voice is completely lost in the shrill alarm filling the room. It's so *loud*. She turns towards Oliver, shouting his name, one part of her completely immobile - in shock that this is really happening, that it has to happen *now*, that it has to happen at all - while another is telling her to *move*. But she doesn't, not even when he reaches her. "Oliver!"

"Felicity!"

She sees his lips moving, but she can't hear him.

He's coming. Zoom is coming. He's *here*. The memory of time *warping* as he reaches through, his clawed hand reaching out for her daughter, fills her mind and the fear it sends searing through her has her freezing even more.

Felicity holds Ellie so tightly her knuckles go white and she vaguely hears Oliver shouting her name and Ellie screaming for both of them as she burrows deeper into her arms.

And then Oliver is suddenly there. He grabs her, wrapping his arms around both of them as he pulls her back towards the hallway, back towards safety.

But they're too late. It's happening too fast.

The time warp instantly springs up in front of them, forcing them to retreat rapidly. Felicity stares at it in horror, waiting - just *waiting* - for Zoom to appear…

But it's not Zoom.

No, it's something far, far worse.

When the now-familiar distortion of reality slices through the air in front of them, it doesn't stay open long. There isn't any bending of time, any barrier, nothing to keep anything from crossing over this time. One second it's there and the next it's gone.

The alarm instantly ceases when the time warp reseals…

Leaving two newcomers in their midst.

"No," Felicity whispers, shaking her head. She drops the elephant she didn't even realize she'd been gripping so hard - God, her fingers actually *ache* - and grabs Ellie tightly, as tight as she can. "*No*."

Oliver's right behind her and she runs right into him. The tension in his body is a palpable thing as he wraps his arms around her and Ellie, holding both of them.

Ellie doesn't share their fear at the sight of the new arrivals, though.

Not even close. Her face brightens tremendously at the sight of the two men in front of her.

"Daddy!" she cries happily.

Chapter 38

"*Ellie*."

The ragged whisper of her name in *his* voice is the only sound in the kitchen. The alarm fell silent several seconds ago, but she still hears it echoing in her ears. She can still see the visceral rip in time a few feet from her, see them stepping through, no barrier in place to stop them.

One second it was just their little family, getting ready to eat lunch like it was any other day, and the next…

The shock of what just occurred numbs her, keeping her from processing what's happening. The *reality* of what it means.

Felicity is vaguely aware of her body fighting to take a breath, to level out her heart where it races in her chest, to make her *feel* something other than the mounting denial that's giving her tunnel vision. The room dims. Blood rushes in her ears, acid flowing through her veins, making her stomach burn as she starts shaking her head.

She doesn't feel the tears that fill her eyes until one slips free, falling down her cheek, landing on the lapel of Ellie's little coat.

All she sees is *him*… and all she feels is her daughter, still in her arms where she holds her tight.

No, not now. *Not now*.

He takes a step towards her - towards *them* - and Felicity instantly backpedals.

"No," she whispers, shaking her head fiercely as she tries to *get away*, but Oliver - *her Oliver* - is still at her back. That doesn't stop her though, because everything in her is telling her to *go*. Her feet stumble against the tiled floor in her haste, leaving scuff marks in her path, and she might well have fallen if not for Oliver's presence.

Her Oliver, that is. Not the one a few feet away.

That Oliver doesn't look at her, not even once. He only has eyes for Ellie. For his daughter.

Felicity has to bite back the grief building in her chest at the look on his face as he watches Ellie. The gut-wrenching desperation makes her

heart *ache*. She knows that feeling all too well. She can read the longing his face because she *feels it*.

A choked sound comes from behind her and she feels her Oliver's breath catching in the way his chest hits her back. His arms are still around her and Ellie, his fingers digging into Felicity just as hard as she's holding Ellie. He's shaking… or is that her? She can't tell. She doesn't want to tell. She doesn't want any of this to be happening.

"There's *two* Daddies!" Ellie declares. It makes both her and Oliver jump, just as much as it makes the Oliver standing before them nearly collapse with relief, like each word she says makes this moment more and more real. Seeing that makes everything *worse*. The delight in the toddler's voice is tangible as she starts wriggling to free herself from her mother's arms. But Felicity's grip is too tight, and she's not letting go for anything. Ellie's brow furrows. "Momma, I want down."

"No, baby," Felicity says, her voice cracking as she cradles the squirming girl against the crook of her neck. "No."

Her Oliver sighs and it sounds more like a sob than anything. She feels him bowing his head behind her, feels his face against her temple, but she can't hear what he's whispering over the white noise filling her ears. His grip on her tightens to the point of pain, the muscles in his arms tensing, before he suddenly takes a deep breath… and then he forces himself to ease up.

To let her go.

To let *Ellie* go.

"*No*!" Felicity snaps, her voice insistent and raw. She stares at the Oliver before her, gritting her teeth. "No, you can't… you can't…"

"Felicity," Oliver whispers in her ear from behind her, cutting her off.

She shakes her head with a strangled, "No," before it fades into a muted sob. "No…"

For the first time since he got here, this older version of Oliver looks at her, their eyes meeting.

It's fleeting, barely a second before he has to look at his daughter again, but it happens.

And it *hurts*.

Never in her life has she been afraid to see Oliver. Never has it been something to send a shock of nauseating horror coiling in her cut. But it does now, because she knows what this means. She knows why he's here.

It'd been so easy to get wrapped up in everything - the constant danger around them and the simple mundaneness of daily life - to lose sight of the fact that while Ellie is theirs, she's not really *theirs*. They've been living on borrowed time. And she's known that. Deep down, she's always known that this day would come. But it was always far off, a future possibility; it was something that had always been designated as "someday."

But someday is today.

And she wants to scream.

He takes another step towards them, one of his hands tentatively coming up.

Felicity immediately steps backwards again but her Oliver doesn't let her go anywhere.

He actually unwinds his arms, whispering, "Felicity," as one hand shifts up to Ellie's back while the other smoothes down Felicity's arm.

If she was able to comprehend anything past what was happening before her, she'd know he's waging the same battle she is. And that he's doing something he perfected long ago - pushing his feelings down because he knows there's only one way this can end.

She can't do that though. Because she doesn't want to. Because she doesn't know *how*. It's beyond her.

The Oliver in front of her stops again at her abrupt movement. There's an energy buzzing in his body, a living *need* under the surface of his skin that highlights the tightness in his muscles and the nervous agitation making his hand shake. He wants to take Ellie, Felicity realizes. He wants to reach out and take her. And he's *fighting it*. For Felicity. Maybe because of her.

Some part of her sees that and understands it - even appreciates it, finds it reminding her why she loves this man so damn much, in any and every version of him. But the rest of her wants to run away the closer he gets. She wishes she'd gone with the impulse to just up and leave that she'd had weeks ago. Could he have found them then?

Would this still be happening?

Oliver closes the space between them, leaving barely a foot separating him from his past life and his daughter.

Felicity's breathing is short and harsh, her lips trembling as she stares up at him.

But he only has eyes for Ellie.

"Hi, Ellie-bug," he says. His eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion and fear, a roadmap of the life he's been living since… since he sent her back in time. But relief and love and happiness slowly erase it as tears fill his eyes. And then he smiles and it takes Felicity's breath away. "I've *missed you*, baby."

His voice is so gritty, so deeply affected, that it nails home exactly what is going on.

This man - *this* Oliver - sent his little girl away for her own safety a month ago and he hasn't seen or heard a word about her since. The only thing he's known is that Barry landed here safely with her in his arms, and that he left her with his past self and Felicity… but that's it. Felicity can't even begin to imagine what that's like, to comprehend knowing so little about her child's fate. She's not unsympathetic… but she also can't make her fingers loosen. Because that's going to be her. And she can't handle that, not even the idea of it. Even though she *knows* the Oliver standing before her needs nothing more than to feel his daughter in his arms, she can't let her go.

She isn't sure how she ever will.

Ellie tilts her head, her eyes dancing over her father's face. "Are you my Before Daddy?" she asks him.

Her voice is equal parts bewilderment and excitement as she glances back at the Oliver standing behind Felicity and then back at the one from the future. It's kind of a miracle that she isn't more confused.

Felicity feels her Oliver nod from behind her. He tries to say something to her, but all that comes out is a dry croak.

It slices right through her and Felicity takes a quick, stuttered breath. The broken sound from the man she loves sends another surge of tears to the surface, a few slipping down her cheeks. With a barely audible moan, Felicity presses her face into Ellie's neck where she takes a

deep, deep breath, breathing her daughter's unique scent in.

Her Oliver's grip on her tightens as he clears his throat and says, "Yeah. He's your Before Daddy."

His words hit her like a rusted knife twisting her insides and she has to bite back the next sob building in her throat. She knows he's feeling the same thing because he steps closer with a shaky breath, fighting his own tears. One hand grips her arm but his other strokes up and down Ellie's spine with jittery fingers. It's like he's trying to memorize the feel of his family in his arms one last time. He probably is, she realizes, because he knows… he knows this is the last time he'll have this - the last moment where they'll have Ellie - for *years* to come.

As Ellie turns to the Oliver standing before them, looking for confirmation, another tear slips from Felicity's eye.

This is it.

Her head spins, working overtime, trying to find a solution, any possible way to keep Ellie in their lives. But it's like trying grab water with her hands - it slips between her fingers, instantly fading away, impermanent and too fluid to hold in her grasp.

Felicity squeezes her eyes shut as she cradles Ellie closer.

"That's right," the older Oliver says, his voice soft with a smile that's meant only for his daughter. "I'm the daddy from your real time."

"Where's my Before Mommy then?" Ellie asks, looking around, as if another Felicity might pop up out of thin air.

Felicity purses her lips together tightly at the very notion of her Before Mommy, of her future self. God, if she's about to lose it right now, how did she ever give her up before, when she sent her back originally? The danger had to have been so very real for them to resort to this. The thought should calm her down, she thinks, that if she can eventually do this because it's the best thing for Ellie, then she can now.

But she *can't.* She can't let her go, she *can't*…

"She's at home, honey," Oliver replies, his smile widening. The thin lines around his eyes crinkle, a clear indication of the years that pass between now and then. This Oliver has lived longer, he's been through more… but the lines also speak to how much more he's smiled. His

eyes light up as he adds, "She's home with your little brother."

Her Oliver inhales sharply behind her while she feels like all the air's been sucked out of her lungs.

"I missed it?" Ellie asks, her eyes widening. Her little mouth opens in surprise as she grasps what her father's telling her more and more. Felicity can feel the excitement that's building in her little body as she uses Felicity's shoulder as a brace to twist towards the Oliver standing before them more fully. "Nate's born?"

"Three days ago," Oliver confirms, his voice no less gravelly. It's thick with emotion as he adds, "And he can't wait to meet you, Ellie-bug."

Felicity can't stop the aching moan that slips out. She shakes her head again, pulling Ellie closer again, pressing her mouth against her little shoulder. She takes a quick breath and a stab of fear has her inhaling even deeper, trying to burn her scent in her memory.

Oliver's voice is even more unsteady as he says, "And your mommy misses you so, *so* much."

His voice cracks at the end and it speaks to just how much her future self misses her daughter. She *feels* that ache in her bones. The thought of her sitting at home right now with a newborn while her husband travels through time to find their toddler… oh, it's too much.

A sob clogs Felicity's throat, more tears slipping free as she opens her eyes. For a second all she sees is the collar of the jacket Ellie's wearing and a sea of her perfect, beautiful curly blonde hair… but then she looks up to find the older Oliver looking at her.

Their eyes meet. His are red-rimmed and sorrowful, filled with an understanding that she *hates*. Because he's begging her every bit as much as she begs him.

But there's only one Ellie.

No.

"Felicity…" he whispers, his eyes never leaving hers. "Can I please hold my daughter?"

Her face crumples, tears blurring her vision. She can't. She *can't.* Denial lives in the very marrow of her bones. There's no part of her that wants to hand Ellie over, not even for a moment. She feels herself

recoiling, feels herself withdrawing…

But then Ellie reaches for him and he's pleading with his eyes as well as his words.

Her Oliver behind her sighs out a quiet, "Felicity," before he strokes a line down her arm. She shakes her head again, like it's the only thing she can do, mouthing the word, '*No,'* but it doesn't stop anything. His hand settles over her grip and he whispers her name again as he works his fingers between hers. He slides them between her hand and Ellie, urging her to let go, to hand her over to the future version of himself.

"Oliver," she protests, tearing her eyes away from his future self to look back at him.

Every inch of what she's feeling lives on his face. He is every bit as gutted as she is, but there's a resignation there, too. He *knows* this is inevitable. He knows there's only one way this can end. There's an acceptance there that she doesn't have. Not yet. And she has the sinking feeling she will need to.

"Please…"

"It's okay," her Oliver says, nodding at her, never looking away from her as he urges her to let go. He tries to smile but he can't as he repeats, "It's okay."

It's not okay, and it won't be for a long, long time.

Handing her daughter over feels like she's losing a limb.

Ellie goes easily, her little arms wrapping around her father's neck as he engulfs her in his embrace. He lets out a little sob of relief, a pained keen that comes from deep in his chest as he cuddles her close, falling a few steps back. He presses kisses against her temple and to the top of her head, rubbing his hand up and down her little back before he pushes his face into the crook of her neck. He breathes her in, the same way Felicity did, and the way his shoulders shake she knows he's fighting the desire to give in and cry.

"I can't…" Felicity starts to protest as she watches them, but the rest of the words won't come. Her hands ache to hold her again, but the loss has already set in. She's leaving. "Ellie…"

She wants to say a million and one things, but the words just won't

come. It doesn't matter, though, because Oliver - *her* Oliver - knows exactly what she's saying.

He turns her around and pulls her into his arms, serving as a pillar of strength for her to break against. She doesn't know how he can do that, how he's not breaking, too. But in that moment, she can't bring herself to care, not just then. Because she *needs* him, and he's there. Because that's who he is, that's the man she loves, the man who always comes through, who puts her needs above his own. She loves him so much, so *painfully* much in that moment that it makes her tears come even harder, because she knows he's feeling this just as acutely as she is. He *knows*, but he also knows that it has to happen.

It *hurts*.

With a broken sob, Felicity buries her face in his chest. She grasps at his shirt as she cries, her knees nearly giving out in her grief. For a second it's only his arms holding her up, strong and steady. Later she'll realize it was only because of him that she got through anything today.

"Shh," he soothes, his voice jagged. "I've got you. We're okay. We'll be okay. I promise you. I *promise*."

For the first time in a long time, she's not sure if she believes him.

She shouldn't have gotten attached. She should have *known* better. But it's too late for that now and there's nothing she can do to keep her heart from splintering into painful shards. They feel like they're trying to pierce their way through her chest, to carve her up from the inside out, because it'd been inevitable. The second she'd realized that Ellie was *her* daughter, she'd fallen in love with her. In the blink of an eye, her entire life changed and it was all because of Ellie. She's the absolute best parts of her and Oliver all rolled into this perfect little girl, her beautiful Ellie who changed *everything*.

"I can't lose her, Oliver," Felicity cries, her voice muffled against his chest. She looks up at him and her heart shatters the rest of the way when she sees her own crippling pain reflected in his eyes. He nods, smoothing his hands over her cheeks and hair, but it's not enough. "I can't. I can't. I don't know how to do this. Please don't make me do this."

She knows it's an unfair burden to place on him, she *knows* it, but she can't stop.

With a muted sob of his own, Oliver pulls her close again, burying his face in her hair. His fingers dig into her, holding her as tight as he dares. His arms shake around her and it makes her clench him tighter.

"I can't…" she whispers.

"I know, baby, I know," he says. "But…"

"What do you mean?" Ellie asks. Her little voice cuts through the moment and her and Oliver instantly turn to look at her where she's staring at them. Her voice is distressed, full of confused concern, her eyes bouncing between them where she sits in her father's arms. It doesn't escape Felicity's attention that the older version of Oliver is watching them with a furrowed brow, like he can't quite make sense of what he's seeing. But Ellie's not done. "You aren't going anywhere, right, Momma? You said you wouldn't leave me. You promised."

Felicity recalls that conversation with perfect clarity. When she'd silently vowed not to give a damn about her future self. When she'd sworn to keep Ellie with her no matter what. But those were the gut-level reactions borne of desperation and…

As she stares at Ellie where she sits in the Oliver from the future's arms - where she belongs - she knows she was wrong.

Not because of her future self - though maybe that should be a consideration, too - but because of Ellie. Because while even a moment ago she'd been ready to hold on until the end of time if need be, she knows that's not what's best for her daughter. She *knows* it now, right now, seeing her in her rightful place in this Oliver's arms.

She will always do what's best for her daughter, even when the personal cost feels unthinkable.

"I'm not, baby," Felicity says. She wipes her face before grasping for her Oliver's hand. He grips her just as tight as she smiles at Ellie. "But you are. You're going back… You're going home."

"But you'll be there, right?" Ellie asks, looking between all the adults in the room for confirmation. She zeroes in on the older Oliver. "You said Momma's at home."

"She is," he says with a nod. "You'll see her right away the moment we're back." He rubs his fingers over Ellie's cheek and brushes her hair back, running his fingers through his hair, trying to refamiliarize himself with his daughter, to prove to himself that she's there and

whole. "But it's a different time, sweetie. And the Mommy here won't see you again for a bit."

The truth in his words hit Felicity *hard*.

Ellie's smart, but she's so young and it's immediately obvious that she doesn't get it. This is beyond her. She looks between all of them again as she says, "I don't understand," looking like that bothers her very much.

"It's okay," Felicity lies, smiling with watery eyes at her daughter. She feels like she might be sick and it has absolutely nothing to do with morning sickness. All of her energy is going towards convincing Ellie that everything is okay, that it will *be* okay. Oliver wraps his arm around her waist, leaning on her as much as she needs him to help her keep standing. "I told you I wouldn't leave you and I meant it. You don't need to worry. You can't lose me."

Despite her furrowed brow, which might very well be more of a reaction to the high emotions filling the room, Ellie nods, believing her.

"That's my girl," Felicity whispers.

As much as she would love to hold Ellie in her arms and never let go, she knows in her heart that this is best for Ellie. It is. And while even the *idea* of giving her up is killing her inside, she will do it. She has to.

But she's not gone yet.

"Can I…" Felicity swallows hard past the lump in her throat. She fights to keep her voice from shaking as she looks at the older Oliver. "Can I hold her, please? Before you go? I just… I just need…"

It's overwhelming. She can't *think*. He seems to understand though. He nods with a soft, "Yeah," before looking at Ellie. The smile that tugs at his lips is so beautifully light and happy and it's just another reminder that he is who her daughter belongs with. He brushes Ellie's hair back, kissing her forehead before looking at Felicity and then Barry. "We have a little bit of time, I think."

God, she'd completely forgotten about Barry. He's standing silently in the background, watching the events he'd had a huge part in starting unfold.

For the first time Felicity realizes he's not wearing the red suit he'd

worn before when he'd originally brought Ellie to their time. Both he and Oliver are dressed in normal clothes, Barry in a casual button-up flannel and Oliver in a wrinkled Henley, looking very much like he's been sleeping in it. There's a dried white splotch of something on his shoulder that she absently realizes is probably Nate's spit-up.

It's a stark reminder that this is not his time, not Ellie's time; that there's a whole life waiting for them somewhere else. And as much as that hurts, as much as it makes her want to hold on even tighter, it also highlights how very much she wants this life with him. She wants the babies and the sleepless nights and the spit-up and everything that goes along with it, so badly it burns.

An image of him soothing their newborn in the middle of the night rises unbidden in her mind. She sees it perfectly - Oliver getting up to take care of him, stopping long enough to kiss her and their sleeping daughter before tending to their son…

It strikes home almost painfully.

Barry's face is morose as he meets the older Oliver's eyes. "Yeah," he says with a nod. "I think we do."

"Why don't we sit down for a few minutes then?" the Oliver from the future suggests as he steps back towards Felicity.

She barely hears him. All her attention is on Ellie, who eagerly opens her arms for her mother as he hands her back over. With a shuddered breath, Felicity pulls her close, hugging her tightly. The older Oliver's hand lingers on Ellie's back, almost as if he's afraid if he stops touching her she'll disappear. Her Oliver is much the same, his arms still wrapped around Felicity, one of his hands coming up to cup the back of Ellie's head, holding her closer.

They form a disjointed cocoon around this little girl, this amazing little girl who means the entire world to every single one of them.

Felicity breathes her in, savoring the feel of her in her arms.

"I'm still hungry, Momma," Ellie says.

A chuckle slips from Felicity's lips at the simple request. "That's right," she starts. She pulls back, brushing her hand down Ellie's arm to grasp her hand. "We were gonna get make some chicken nuggets, weren't we?"

Ellie nods. "Yep." She glances over Felicity's shoulder as she adds, "I dropped Ellie the Elephant, Momma. That noise is really loud."

"It really is," Felicity agrees. They'd both dropped the elephants, in fact. The siren had been so deafening, so disjointing, nothing else had mattered. It's a noise that she will never be able to forget. She sniffles, taking a steadying breath as she says, "How about we get some food and then we'll get your elephant, okay?"

"I can get her something," Barry offers quietly.

Felicity's eyes fly to the younger man - well, he's not *younger*. He's technically older, but he looks almost the exact same. She smiles her gratitude, unwilling to lose a second with her daughter if she can avoid it. "Thank you. That would be…" She wants to tell him how much it means to her, but she just can't *think* right now. "Uh, chicken nuggets and chocolate milk?"

Barry nods, giving her a smile that reminds her very much of this time's Barry before heading towards the fridge.

Ellie's eyes dance with excitement as she makes a delighted noise. "I can have chocolate milk?"

Felicity grins at her, running her trembling fingers over Ellie's soft cheeks.

The little girl could have just about anything she wants right now and she doesn't even know it.

"Sure," Felicity says, her legs suddenly unsteady beneath her. Blinking back tears, she takes a stilted step towards the long bench built into the wall next to the pantry. "Just promise… promise me you'll eat a good dinner tonight, okay? And be extra quiet for the baby, and… and…"

She's not sure what the rest of her words were going to be, but they trail off as a pang of loss and overwhelming sadness floods her.

Felicity sits down, situating Ellie in her lap as Barry moves around the kitchen in barely-there blurs while the older Oliver watches them, his own sorrow stamped all over his features.

Her Oliver's in much the same boat. He never lets Felicity or Ellie go, sitting down with them, his side pressed firmly to Felicity's. He only has eyes for Ellie, and his fingers shake where he runs his fingers

through her hair.

Ellie's unusually quiet, staring at Felicity. Her eyes switch to Oliver and her brow furrows, her lips pursing.

"I don't like when you have Sad Eyes," she says softly. Ellie pats Felicity's shoulder as she adds, "Momma's okay, Daddy. See?"

Felicity presses her lips together to keep her tears at bay as Oliver huffs out a chuckle. But it quickly turns into a muted sob and she knows he's remembering all the times she's said that very thing over the last few weeks. And that his Sad Eyes aren't for Felicity this time.

"She is," Oliver replies. He cups Ellie's cheek as he nods. "And she's going to be okay, right?"

A surge of love hits her that has her choking out a quiet laugh as she leans into him.

"Yes," Ellie says with a definitive nod. "And you, too, Daddy. Right?"

"Right," he says, but it's barely audible. Ellie doesn't seem convinced, and Oliver clears his throat, nodding with a stronger, "I'll be okay, Ellie-bug." Felicity glances at him and her heart breaks all over again at the look on his face. He gives Ellie a watery smile. "Could I… can I have a hug?"

Ellie's next nod is filled with more force as she practically dives into his arms. She doesn't have to go far, leaving her draped between them, her arms wrapped around Oliver's neck, her face pressed against his throat.

It's only when Ellie can't see his face that he lets himself crack, just a bit. He presses his lips together tightly to keep himself quiet as he folds himself around her, a tear slipping from the corner of his eye.

"Oh Oliver," Felicity breathes.

She presses her forehead against his cheek, wrapping her arms around both of them, letting out a ragged gulp of air. He leans into her as he cradles the back of Ellie's head, his other arm wrapping around Felicity's legs, pulling her closer.

It's becoming more and more obvious that Ellie knows *something* is happening, but she doesn't get it - not at all. She hugs Oliver back tightly, her little body tensing, nervousness settling in her limbs.

"I'm sorry."

Felicity jumps, her head whipping over to find the older Oliver had sat down at some point on her other side. He's staring at them - all three of them - his face pinched with sadness.

"We didn't think…" The words trail off in a sigh. "We didn't have a choice. It was the only way we could think of that kept her safe. The last thing we wanted to do was send her away. We thought it'd be a few days, if that." He looks down at Ellie then, who's still wrapped around his younger self. "We didn't think about how it would affect you - *us* - when she had to come back home."

A whip of anger slices through her chest at that… but it's gone just as quickly as it'd appeared. Because she remembers feeling much the same about her older self. And as much as this hurts - as painful as this is - she can't regret that they'd sent her Ellie. She's had more joy and love in her life in the past month than any other time she can remember. She wouldn't trade having Ellie for the world, even for this short amount of time. Not even knowing how hard it's going to be letting her go, and how dark and pained the following days and weeks and months will be without her.

He smiles at her, the older Oliver, like he knows exactly how she feels. And he does, maybe even more than she can possibly appreciate. He's been there, since the beginning. Ellie is *his* daughter. He understands what she's feeling on an entirely different level.

Before either Felicity or her Oliver can respond - not that there's anything they can really say - the older Oliver sits up a little straighter, looking around the kitchen. His brow furrows as he takes in his surroundings.

"This is the manor?" he asks them.

Felicity nods absently, suddenly paying way more attention to Ellie when she pulls back, eager to be part of the conversation, too. Her Oliver manages a, "It is," as he looks down at the toddler. His smile is a little more solid this time around and he leans forward, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

When the Oliver from the future doesn't respond - he's staring at the kitchen island blankly, like he's trying to make sense of what's around him - Felicity frowns. Surely he recognizes his childhood home… He *should*. She glances around with him. Nothing's changed, nothing that she can outright see.

"Why?" she asks.

He looks back at her, but he doesn't reply. Instead he asks, "When is this?"

"June of 2014," her Oliver replies.

"What?" His jaw drops. "That's not…" he stutters before the words fade.

Some things will never change and Felicity can read his expression as well as ever - whatever he'd expected to hear, that wasn't it.

"What is it?" she asks.

"June of…" he echoes. He looks between them before taking in how very closely they're sitting, the way Oliver's arm is wrapped around her legs, just like he had been in the limo, and how she's turned into him. All with a three-year-old half-cradled between them. She can only imagine the picture they present. "And you're *together*?"

Felicity almost takes offense at the incredulous way he asks it before remembering how much has changed in the last month.

A lot.

Before they can respond though, the future Oliver's eyes dart to Ellie, his brow creasing with worry as he asks, "Sweetheart, what did you do?"

"Nothing," Ellie replies, defensiveness coloring her voice. "I didn't do anything."

She's wrong. She's done *everything*.

Felicity smiles at that thought, sweeping some of Ellie's hair behind her ear. "It's kind of hard to ignore some things when you know…" She shrugs, looking at her Oliver. He's already looking at her, his face soft with adoration. "When you just know," she finishes.

"I don't understand," the older Oliver says, shaking his head. He looks back at them, his mouth hanging open, before looking back to where Barry's checking on Ellie's chicken nuggets. "This is too early. This is a *year* too early."

"Maybe that's not such a big deal in the grand scheme of things," Barry says. He shoves his hands into his pockets with a shrug. "Sometimes

little changes just get skipped over. Time self-corrects. And as much as your relationship history means to *you*, how much does it really matter to the speed force? They're just getting a head start here - is it really *that* big a change?"

"I'm pregnant."

The older Oliver head whips around so fast she's a little stunned he doesn't hurt his neck in the process. He stares at her, jaw unhinged, eyes as wide as saucers. He's completely gobsmacked, and she can't help but smile.

He is the only person she'll have the chance to tell, and she knows it. Ellie and the press have already spilled the beans to literally everyone else in the world, leaving her with just this tiny moment. She's going to savor it for the rest of her life, this reprieve in the midst of her sorrow, because the look on his face is *so* surprised, so totally thrown, and she loves it.

"Well, there goes that theory," Barry deadpans.

"You're…" Oliver shakes his head, like he's certain he heard her wrong. "You're *pregnant*?"

Felicity nods as her Oliver kisses her shoulder and Ellie stares up at her with a barely-contained grin.

"How did that…?"

Felicity's snort cuts him off. "You one hundred percent know exactly how this happened, Oliver," she says. It takes him all of two seconds to catch up with what she's saying and then he blushes, ducking his head with a tiny huff of a chuckle. He *blushes*. Well, it's good to know she can still have that effect on him. "Besides," Felicity continues, elbowing her Oliver, "you've figured that out twice on your own already, apparently." The future Oliver looks up, meeting his younger self's gaze before meeting hers again. She makes a face at him. "Don't play clueless with me, mister."

That earns her a full-out laugh from him. It comes from deep in his chest, and it's so full of life and joy that it makes her pause for a second. This is a version of Oliver she's only *glimpsed* in her own. Seeing him like this now - seeing the way he lets go during the simple act of laughing - it's like a promise of the future they have together. Her heart lodges itself in her throat, tears filling her eyes for an entirely different reason as she smiles at him.

"God, you're beautiful," he says, shaking his head in wonder. That takes her aback, too, the ease with which he says what he wants without reservation. He stares at her and the intensity in his gaze is almost too much. "You've always been so beautiful. I don't know how I stayed away from you as long as I did."

It's her turn to blush, something that makes his smile grow with a fondness that's been cultivated from years of being with the person you love.

"Thank you," she says, because it's the only thing she can think to say with all of *that* staring at her.

"I'm glad I got a clue earlier than you did, then," her Oliver replies, gratitude evident in his voice and maybe a hint of possessiveness, too. She can't say that doesn't send a thrill through her.

Both men look at each other, and some sort of agreement passes between them before they both look back at her. Okay, *that* definitely makes her heart stutter a few times. It's overwhelming when one of them looks at her, but having the focus of *two* Olivers is enough to make her forget how to speak.

Or, not so much.

"Pretty sure I had a dream that started like this once," she mutters as she looks between them. It's only when her Oliver's eyebrows shoot up, looking the tiniest bit scandalized, and the future Oliver breaks out in a grin that she realizes exactly what she just said. She blushes horribly, her eyes widening. "That came out way dirtier than I meant."

"Sure it did," the older Oliver says with a chuckle. Okay, apparently at some point he gets far more accustomed to her innuendo-laden blunderings. And he's not wrong - she did have a dream that started this way once and it had wound up every bit as dirty as the older version of Oliver insinuates.

Felicity can only shrug, making him laugh again before she looks at her Oliver. He's smiling… and he just looks *smitten*. It makes her flush with happiness.

"Congratulations," the Oliver from the future says, a heavy look of affection etched into his every feature. "I don't understand this, but… I'm happy for you. For both of you."

"So we don't have any kids before Ellie?" Felicity asks, even though

they both already know the answer. "I'm not… I mean, I wasn't pregnant before her?"

Oliver lets out a self-deprecating laugh. "Honey, I didn't even kiss you until the Fall of 2014."

"Oh," she manages, but he's not done.

"And then everything was a mess for nearly a year before we figured things out… Well, before I figured things out," he admits. "You've always been a bit ahead of me in that department."

Her Oliver bristles at her side, stiffening. He sits up a little taller and she can feel his desire to speak up, to deny his other self's words - the last month is beautiful evidence of the contrary - but before he can, Felicity grabs his hand. She squeezes his fingers, a silent sign of solidarity. He's come so far since Ellie entered their lives and he's not the same man as the Oliver eight years his senior sitting on her other side.

If his future self's sudden presence has underscored anything - other than their longing for Ellie - it's that they're on a very different path now than they had been before.

And it's because of *them*, their choice. Ellie might have been the catalyst, but *they* took that step.

The older Oliver doesn't miss the move, and she doesn't miss the way he smiles at the sight. He sees it, too.

"What does that mean, then?" Felicity asks. "How does all of this work? What else has changed? And why don't you remember it? Why didn't it shift in your time? Because from where I'm sitting," she says, waving at him, "nothing's changed in your time."

He's at just as much of a loss as she is. "I don't know," he says. He looks at Ellie and then at her and Oliver. "I don't know what it means."

It's disheartening, to say the least, and something about his demeanor tells her he at least has a theory, but whatever it is he isn't sharing.

Barry looks like he might have an idea, too, but he doesn't speak up as he brings over a plate of chicken nuggets surrounding a heaping pile of ketchup - the little girl loves her ketchup, and apparently Uncle Barry knows this - along with a huge glass of chocolate milk.

Delight brightens Ellie's face at the sight, but before he can reach them, Felicity's mom-mode kicks in and she says, "How about we move this party over to the table." She smiles down at Ellie, tickling her fingers down the front of her shirt, forcing herself *not* to think about how that might be the last time she gets to do that for a long, long time. "We don't want all that ketchup all over your shirt like last time, do we?"

"I was messy," Ellie says with a giggle, looking way too proud of herself.

"Yes, you certainly were," Felicity replies, tapping her nose as her Oliver untangles himself from her.

She moves to stand, very intent on keeping Ellie in her arms, until the older Oliver suddenly reaches for the toddler.

Felicity freezes, her heart stopping the instant he moves. She grips Ellie tighter, her eyes widening with a plea she doesn't get the chance to voice before he realizes what he's doing. He goes stock-still himself for a split second before he pulls his hands back, shooting her an apologetic look.

It's not just that though; there's a quiet desperation underneath it, the desire to hold Ellie, and that has guilt crashing through her.

He's just acting on instinct, one that's probably beating at him, because his daughter's been *gone*, and Felicity's…

God, she just can't let her go. Not yet.

"Oliver, I…" she starts, but he cuts her off with a, "Sorry, that was… I just…"

He licks his lips, a nervous tic that she recognizes very well, before he stands and steps back, giving her space.

"Thank you," she whispers, smiling at him. It's only then that she realizes more tears are starting to cloud her vision and she blinks them away. "I'm sorry, I can't…"

"It's okay, Felicity," he replies. "I understand."

And he does. She can hear it in his voice.

She mouths, '*Thank you,*' to him again anyway as she stands with Ellie

in her arms. He nods in return, his eyes switching to her Oliver. He's not far behind her, his hand never leaving Felicity's back as they make their way to the kitchen table, Barry close behind with the food.

Felicity sits with Ellie in her lap, twisting her so she's facing the table. "Let's get this off first," she says, tugging on the tie holding Ellie's coat together. It takes a second, but they work together to remove the little jacket, leaving her in the little frilly dress.

Barry sets the plate and glass down, earning him a happy, "Thank you, Uncle Barry! You don't burn them like Momma does."

All three men chuckle at that.

"Hey," Felicity protests, tugging on a springy curl of Ellie's hair.

"Sorry, Momma," her daughter says, not sounding at all sincere as she grabs a chicken nugget and douses it in ketchup.

Felicity eyes the glass of milk, pushing it a bit away so Ellie's forced to get Felicity's help drinking it. Uncle Barry might cook some mean chicken nuggets, but he clearly doesn't grasp the concept of age-appropriate glassware. She really doesn't want to send her daughter back home covered in ketchup or chocolate milk.

The reminder that she has to send her back at all hits her like a knife to the gut, taking her breath away once again.

Felicity swallows uneasily, kissing the top of Ellie's head. She glances over at her Oliver, who's sitting next to her, and he gives her a sad smile.

"So," she says, desperate for a subject change. If she has to sit here in silence, she's going to start crying and that… she can't do that. She looks at the future Oliver where he sat down on the opposite side of the table, his eyes on Ellie. At the sound of her voice, he looks back at Felicity. "Is it also June in your time?"

It's the most ridiculous subject change ever, but it gives them *something* to talk about.

"Yeah," the older Oliver replies. "It is. It's…" He lets out a heavy breath, his shoulders falling slightly. Felicity can see how hard the last month's been in the lines on his face. "I can't believe it's June already." He lets out a semi-shocked laugh, scrubbing his hand over his face. "I can't believe Nate's already here. Or there, rather."

Felicity's heart warms at the mention of the little boy Ellie had been so excited to meet. She'll get to see him soon. She shakes her head minutely, pushing that thought away. As happy as she is that Ellie will get to meet her little brother, she's not going yet. *Not yet.*

"Which reminds me," he continues, looking at Ellie. She perks up, looking at him. He reaches across the table, wiggling her arm playfully. "A certain somebody is officially four years old."

Both Felicity and her Oliver start at that.

An excited gasp prefaces Ellie sitting up taller, a pterodactyl-shaped chicken nugget clutched in her hand forgotten. "Me?"

The older Oliver laughs, stroking the length of her little forearm with his fingers as he says, "Yeah you, silly. Who else would it be?"

"I don't know," Ellie replies with a shrug. "Lots of people."

"We missed her birthday?" her Oliver asks, looking down at Ellie.

The full implication of that hits Felicity square in the chest. They missed her birthday. They missed the opportunity to have a cake and presents and a celebration. Not that she's been lacking in the sweets and presents part, but *still*. Her birthday. They hadn't known. Her stomach sinks with regret.

"She didn't tell you?" the other Oliver asks.

"No," Felicity says, shaking her head. "She just said the seventeenth when I asked her. She didn't know the month."

"May seventeenth," he confirms. He tweaks Ellie's arm, but the excitement about her birthday has passed. She's back to her chicken nuggets. He chuckles. "It was all she could talk about a few weeks ago. Well, a few weeks before she came here."

She hadn't even mentioned it once.

They'd missed it.

A weighty silence fills the room. At some point her Oliver's hand migrates up her arm and across her shoulders until he's cupping the back of her neck. His fingers rub soothing circles into her tense muscles, but she only has eyes for Ellie.

Felicity watches the toddler eat blankly, her mind spinning with the

possibilities of what could have been. God, what had they even done on the seventeenth? Had that been the press conference? Or the day after? The day of their date? She knows it. It's in her head somewhere - the last few weeks are emblazoned in her mind - but right now it's like trying to capture smoke in her hands. She can't *grasp* it and she feels the desperate need to know exactly what they'd done that day. To know that they'd at least done *something* for her.

Ellie pulls her out of her thoughts when she reaches for the glass of milk.

"I can't reach it, Momma," she says, straining. Her little ketchup-coated fingers barely graze the cup, and that snaps Felicity into action.

"Let me help you, sweetie," Felicity offers. They maneuver the cup so she can get a healthy drink of the chocolate milk. It leaves a ridiculously adorable milk mustache in its wake and where before Felicity would have wiped it away, she leaves it now. Because it makes her smile. "Nice mustache."

"I don't have a mustache," Ellie replies, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. The way she butchers 'mustache' makes Felicity chuckle. "You're silly, Momma."

Her laugh falls away at that, Felicity's face crumpling.

God, she's going to *miss her*.

"Is it safe for her?" her Oliver asks, looking at his older self. "In your time? From Zoom?"

That name has Felicity shuddering, closing her eyes against the memories.

"It is," he confirms. "Finally. It took a while, but it's safe again. There's a barrier in place, so Zoom can't get through anymore. It's not from our time. It's from our future. I don't understand how it works. Felicity's tried explaining it in theoretical terms, but…" He waves his hand next to his head to emphasize his lack of understanding. "It's got something to do with tachyons and how they're working their way through time."

"Is that still going to be true or are we going to have to worry about him after you're gone?" Felicity waves her hand this time, trying to find the words to her thoughts. "I mean, it doesn't change, does it, because things have changed in our time?" All she gets are confused

looks from both Olivers and she tries again. "It's just we're doing things differently than they happened in your time. Because you obviously don't remember this," she says, gesturing between her and her Oliver, "but it's still happening. So that does mean the barrier won't work? Will it only affect your timeline? Will it eventually stop because so much has changed, or…"

"I don't think that's how it works," Barry says. "The barrier's up. It's been up, because I felt it. I've been feeling it, trying to get over here. So it's still there, still *here*."

"But the more that changes…" Felicity says.

"I guess that depends on how much goes differently," the older Oliver interrupts. "If it's just that you are together now, then I think it's fine, even with the baby." He glances at Barry for confirmation. The nod he gives in return isn't all that confident, though.

"Malcolm," her Oliver says abruptly.

With a frown, the older version of himself looks at him. "What?"

"He lived longer before," Oliver points out. "Ellie mentioned him in your time, when he…" He lowers his voice as much as he can, for Ellie's benefit, but his turmoil is evident in the way his grip on her neck tightens as he remembers the last few days. "When he hurt Felicity."

"Wait," the older Oliver says, putting a hand up in bewilderment. "He's dead here?"

"I didn't have a choice," Oliver replies, his tone leaving no room for argument. "He came after Ellie. He was going to take her, and he… He hurt Felicity in this time, too. There was no way I was letting him go, not when…"

The very thought of how far Malcolm would have gone if he'd survived resonates between them. Felicity looks at him, covering his hand where it's locked in a tight fist against his thigh. When he looks at her, the same grief lining his face that she'd woken to after that week of being knocked out, she finds herself nodding. Because he made the right choice and he needs to remember that.

"Good."

That has them both looking back to the older man sitting across from

them. There's a solemn air about him as he meets Oliver's eyes, nodding in silent agreement. They are very much of one mind on this issue and it's obvious.

"And thank you," the older Oliver adds, his eyes slipping to Ellie and then Felicity before meeting his other self's gaze again. "There were a lot of times I had the chance, but I never took it. Not until I almost lost everything." For a moment, they both wear masks of matching agony and Felicity wants to reach out and take his hand, too. But then he sighs. "But that might complicate things for you later. There were times when he was… useful."

"We'll find a way," Felicity says, glancing back at Ellie. The dried chocolate milk mustache is still evident as she munches happily on a chicken nugget shaped liked a stegosaurus with ketchup stained fingers. She strokes the girl's hair, adding, "We didn't need an ally like him. I don't want to depend on someone we can't rely on."

"Malcolm was always out for himself, first and foremost," the older man agrees. "But he did care about Thea." The mention of his sister's name is enough to make his younger self's shoulders fall. It's still so fresh - God, everything with her had happened just last night. And she's still upstairs, chained and drugged into submission. Unaware of that reality, the older Oliver continues, "He cared in his own twisted way, but he did care. He hurt her as much as helped her. He hugely changed the course of her life over the next few years. Without him here… I don't know what will happen to her."

"We'll help her on our own," her Oliver says, his voice uneven. Neither of them notice immediately when the other Oliver goes dangerously still at his words, confusion making him frown. "Whatever she needs to get better, we'll do it. We don't need Malcolm for that."

The older Oliver's eyes narrow, his brow furrowing. "Why does she need help *now*?" he asks, his voice low.

"She… The mirakuru and the vertigo," Felicity fills in. "When Isabel kidnapped her, she infected her with-"

"What?" he breathes out, cutting her off. All the color drains from his face and he looks like he might be sick. "Infected?"

"That didn't happen in your time?" Felicity asks.

His jaw works, but no sounds comes out. All he manages is a jerky shake of his head before he shoves away from the table. He takes a

step, but it's obvious he doesn't know exactly *where* he needs to go. A painfully lost look colors his face before he shakes his head again. His thumb and forefinger are rubbing together, and it's clear he needs to do something. He resorts to pacing, bowing his head as he goes.

"Is she…" he starts, but he can't finish the sentence.

"She's okay," her Oliver replies immediately. "As okay as she can be."

"She's not… well," Felicity amends lamely. The older Oliver's eyes are sharp when his gaze finds hers and she quickly adds, "But we're working on it. Caitlin and Cisco are here. They're helping. The mirakuru cure is just a temporary fix, the Vertigo keeps burning it out of her system. But she is okay. As in she's not hurt. Physically, I mean. Like a wound or something. She's… she's just sedated right now."

"She stabbed Laurel," the younger Oliver says. It's said with the bluntness of shock, not really a fact, not really a realization quite yet. It's more a reporting of events as they've occurred.

Either way, it has the future version of himself freezing in his place. He halts with a squeak of his boot, spinning to face them as he blanches at his younger self.

"*Laurel*…" His voice sounds like he hasn't considered that name in years, like it's foreign on his tongue. The surprise is there, along with a hint of old grief, but a distinct shift is also evident. This is the thing he was searching for a second ago - something to do, something to work on. "With what?" he demands. "Where?"

Felicity frowns at the oddity of that being his question as Oliver answers, "An arrow. To her kidney, a major vein and her lung."

"Oliver, *no*," Barry interrupts, stepping around the table towards the older man. There's a firmness to his voice that she would never have expected from him. "You know what happens if you change things. You know how dangerous that can be."

"Malcolm's dead, Barry," Oliver snaps. "Malcolm's dead nearly a decade early and Felicity's pregnant three years before she should be. I think it's safe to say things have already changed."

Barry moves to retort with even more force, his face taut with agitation, but the sound of heels clicking on the floor has him biting his tongue as he spins to face whoever's walked into the room.

"Oliver, I thought I heard…"

Felicity's never seen Oliver as pale as the future version of himself goes. He looks like he's seen a ghost. And, considering Ellie's reaction when she first landed in their time, she supposes he has.

"Mom?"

Moira Queen halts a few feet away from them, just as thrown by his presence as he is by hers. Her gaze goes from one Oliver to the other, recognition slowly dawning as she puts two and two together.

For the first time since they'd arrived from the future, Felicity lets herself really look at the older Oliver. The differences are immediately obvious, and stark. He's filled out a great deal, settling into his broad chest and shoulders with a grace that she's sure will make her heart skip a couple dozen beats in the future. There's nothing remarkable about his clothes except that they still fit him snugly - something she can appreciate even now - but the real difference is his hair. It's shorn closer to his scalp, but even then Felicity can see the gray shining amongst the blonde. And his beard… it's an actual beard. It's well-kept, but it's longer, like he learned to let the stubble grow out some. It, too, is peppered with gray, but it doesn't age him. It simply highlights what makes him so beautiful in the first place. Despite the circumstances surrounding the immediate moment, Felicity can tell all the extra lines in his face are mostly from smiling, from laughter.

His mother can see it as well, just as much as she connects the dots about what exactly is happening.

"Oh," Moira whispers, her face falling as she looks to Ellie, a sorrowful line pulling at her lips.

But the older version of Oliver barely registers that.

He's too mesmerized by her presence.

"It's June of 2014," he murmurs absently. "How…"

He takes a few steps towards his mother. Moira looks up at him, a maternal love softening her features at whatever she sees in his face. Oliver reaches out for her, clearly still questioning what he's seeing. He hesitates just before he touches her shoulder. When he finally does, it's tentative, like he expects her to be an apparition, like he thinks his hand might pass right through her.

It doesn't, though. She's as solid as everyone else in this room, and when he feels that - feels *her* - a rush of air bursts past his lips in a half-laugh, half-sob that speaks volumes about what he's been through.

With a choked sound, Oliver engulfs her in a hug that's met with a surprised gasp from Moira. Her startled eyes widen, clearly not expecting that reception, before the very same thing Felicity had realized seems to hit her.

She isn't alive in this Oliver's world.

Moira closes her eyes, melting into his embrace with a soft whisper of his name. She wraps him up as much as she can - Felicity had thought she was small compared to her Oliver, but compared to this one, she's positively tiny - as she holds her son.

Oliver holds her back tightly, like he might not let her go, burying his face against her shoulder.

Her Oliver squeezes Felicity's hand, and she knows he's remembering the gut punch from when Ellie had confirmed that she didn't know her grandmother in the future. It's a reality for his future self, a reality he isn't nearly ready to face, despite the differences he's had with his mother.

"How are you alive?" the future Oliver rasps, the words muffled. "You should be gone. How are you here?"

"Wait," Felicity says, furrowing her brow. "When did she die in your time?"

He pulls back from Moira, but only slightly, his grip on her still tight as he glances back at Felicity. He opens his mouth to speak before stopping himself, his eyes flying to Barry, who shrugs.

"I don't know any more than you do, man," Barry says. "But things are clearly different here, even if we don't remember the changes." He nails Oliver with a steady gaze, finally answering the other man's real question. "I still wouldn't risk saying anything, though."

He doesn't have to.

"Slade Wilson killed me, didn't he?" Moira asks. "He wanted to hurt you, so he hurt your family."

The way Oliver's head jerks back to look at her is more than enough proof that her assumption is correct. He doesn't even try denying it as his face crumples, his eyes filling with an old pain. It might have happened years ago for him, but the scars are still there. They always will be. And seeing her in the flesh like this again, it's clearly bringing it all back up to the surface.

"I couldn't stop him," he confesses, his voice thick with regret. "I couldn't do anything. You were barely four feet away from me and he ran you through right in front of me, right in front of Thea."

"Oh God," Felicity whispers, clenching Oliver's fingers in her own. He's shaking slightly, but he holds her just as tightly.

"I couldn't stop him," the older Oliver repeats, the words cracking with emotion. "I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, Oliver," she breathes, touching his cheek gently. She stares into his eyes, and even Felicity can see the veracity of her words as she says, "I would stand between you and a madman a hundred times in every timeline."

"How did it…" He looks back at her and Oliver before looking back to Moira. "How did that not happen in this time?"

"Well," Moira says with a humorless chuckle, but the younger Oliver answers for her.

"He saw Ellie," he says.

The older Oliver whips his head back to look at his younger self with a sharply direct, "*What*?" He takes a stutter step towards them, his eyes finding Ellie, before realizing it's not entirely necessary. She's *safe*, and she's in her mother's arms, where she's twirling a chicken nugget through the last of her ketchup. "Did he…?"

"No," Oliver interrupts, shaking his head. He takes a deep breath, looking down at Ellie as well. "No, he didn't get her, but it was… It was close."

Felicity huffs out a nervous little laugh. "And when he says close, he means that he broke into this very kitchen and…"

Her words fade as she remembers the fear and panic and anguish that'd slammed into her when Ellie had flickered in her arms.

She wraps her arms more fully around Ellie, cradling the toddler closer.

"And what?" the older Oliver says, his voice rising slightly.

"And she stabbed him in the eye with a kitchen knife," her Oliver finishes for her, skipping over the bad parts of one of the worst days of Felicity's life with ease. He nods his head towards Moira, who purses her lips, a thin sheen of pride and fondness filling her eyes. It's a weird combination, and Felicity hopes the fondness is her thinking about her son and not stabbing someone. "Slade, he'd… It was just a more direct route. When he saw Ellie, he saw…" He can't finish the sentence, and Felicity isn't sure she wants him to. Instead, he looks at Moira. "It was close, but she saved my life. She saved Ellie's life."

It's too much for him to handle, it seems, as the future Oliver stares at his younger self before turning to stare at Moira. After a second, all he can manage is a hushed, "But he's… Slade… Did he survive that, is he alive, like… If he comes back…"

If he comes back, he might hurt Moira again.

"No," Oliver answers. "He's dead." His future self's jaw drops, incredulous eyes flying to Barry as Oliver adds, "It's a long… long story, but he's gone."

"Very gone," Felicity adds, disgust twisting her face. "Like… Wicked Witch of the West levels of melted gone."

The older Oliver scrubs his face roughly with one palm, digging his fingers into his eyes. He shakes his head, his mouth working silently for a second before he finally says, "I can't believe how much has changed. I can't believe all of this changed so much from bringing her back here."

"You change one thing," Barry says softly, "and you change everything."

The somber words are full of experience and wisdom, and it's obviously a callback to a conversation this Barry had had with Oliver's future self. They're also a solemn reminder of just how much danger Ellie had been in during her time, so much that they'd risked changing everything just to save her.

"I had no idea," the older man says. "I had…" He turns to Moira, his eyes scanning her almost desperately. "So he didn't hurt you? You're

okay, nothing…"

"I'm fine," Moira replies, patting his shoulder lovingly.

"He could have killed you," he grits out.

"Oliver." She cups his cheek. "You are my son, and I *love you*. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you." Moira smiles, and the movement has the overhead light reflecting on the tears gathering in her eyes. "You're a father. You must know that."

The words do exactly as she'd intended them to. The older Oliver nods, casting his eyes toward Ellie. She's finished her lunch and has settled back against Felicity. She's watching them with confused curiosity, but she stays quiet, content to drink the chocolate milk that Felicity helps her hold.

"Mom," he says with no small amount of hesitation. "You have to tell him. Tell me."

That has Barry standing up straighter, his eyes darting back and forth between them. But it's not his reaction that's interesting to Felicity - it's Oliver's. *Her* Oliver. He goes stock-still next to her, his chest pausing as he suddenly holds his breath.

Moira frowns. "Tell him what?"

"Oliver…" Barry says in warning. "Don't."

But Oliver ignores him. He stares at his mother, and when he speaks again, his voice is deceptively soft as he says, "About William."

Moira freezes, her skin instantly paling. She backs away from the older version of her son, clasping her hands tightly before her as she evaluates him with a new awareness. It's almost defensive the way she pulls her shoulders back, like she's bracing for battle. It piques Felicity's curiosity, as does the fact that the name sounds vaguely familiar.

"He'll forgive you," Oliver vows. "I know, because I did… eventually. But it should have come from you and it should have happened any other way than it did. I almost lost everything because of it." He stares at her for a beat. "Don't let that happen again."

What the *hell* are they talking about?

Felicity glances back at her Oliver but his face is expressionless, shuttered, his eyes on his mother. She can see the hints of the anticipated betrayal, the suspicions, the reality that there's something *else* his mother hasn't told him about. The past few weeks have changed so much - for the better - but it doesn't erase what she's done in the past.

So many lies…

"Oliver," Moira says, his name coming out in a plea. Her eyes beg him every bit as much as her voice does. "You have to understand…"

"I do," the older Oliver interrupts, nodding. "I know why you did what you did. I don't agree with it, but I do understand. And I forgive you for it." Moira makes a tiny sound in the back of her throat, her lips pressed together in a thin line. He smiles, so softly. "That's not something I ever thought I'd get the chance to tell you. But you still need to tell him. And you need to do it now."

For a long moment, nothing happens. The air in the kitchen grows thicker, filled with so many unsaid things… but then Moira nods. It's so small it's almost imperceptible, but it's there.

The itch of curiosity burns at the back of Felicity's skull. It's not her question to ask though. No, it's Oliver's. *Her* Oliver's. And he doesn't waste a second. If there's anything these last few weeks have taught them - really, the last few *minutes* have taught them - it's that time is precious and oh so fleeting, and that avoiding facing certain truths and realities only makes it harder later on.

"Who is William?" he asks. His voice is quiet, near-monotone, but the potential power in the words are like a foghorn in the contained space.

"He's my half-brother!" Ellie announces.

Felicity's stomach *plummets*, her jaw dropping. Half-brother?

It suddenly hits her where she's heard the name before. Her eyes dart to the fridge door where Ellie's drawings hang. The two at the very top are some of her first, including the ones outlining her Star City family… and her Central City family. Including William.

She has a half-brother, another kid out there who is half-related to her, which means… She can't breathe. Her lungs are suddenly tight, somehow feeling like they're expanding way too fast at the same time,

too big for her body to contain them.

The gravity of this is *huge*. It's so big - so life-altering - it's blinding.

She turns to look at Oliver, who looks like he's going to be sick. It grounds her in a way she isn't expecting. He didn't know either. He had no idea. He has a son somewhere out there, a child, and he didn't know.

Felicity grips his hand tightly in hers, in solidarity. This is shocking to *her*; she can't even imagine how much he feels like his entire world has just been turned upside down in a heartbeat.

Again.

She isn't sure how Ellie manages it, but she leans forward, setting the now-empty glass of chocolate milk on the table as Felicity's numb fingers fall away.

For a long moment, the clink of the glass is the only noise in the room.

"What?" her Oliver asks, in the quietest voice Felicity's ever heard from him.

"You were so young," Moira says, taking a step towards them before stopping. She looks lost, like she doesn't know what to do. With anything. She clasps and unclasps her hands, her eyes imploring as she stares at him. It's the least put-together Felicity has ever seen the woman. "You said yourself that you weren't ready to be a father."

Oliver stops breathing. Felicity looks at him, squeezing his hand harder. She sees the realization in his eyes, sees the way his mind races to put the pieces together, to make sense of what Moira's saying. The pain on his face - the absolute look of regret and sorrow - is gutting. There is not a single part of this that is his fault and yet she can see he's already blaming himself.

"Samantha?" he asks, though it's obvious he already knows the answer. Moira nods anyway, pursing her lips to keep herself quiet. "But…" Oliver shakes his head dimly. "She said she lost the baby."

"She lied," Moira says. She takes a second, steeling herself. "Because I paid her to."

Felicity gasps at that, staring at the older women incredulously as Oliver's eyes slip shut. He looks as nauseous as Felicity's felt most of

the day. She feels utterly helpless, watching him process the news. A son. He has a son out there, somewhere, with a woman who accepted money from his mother to disappear, to *lie* to Oliver about it.

His own *mother* did this.

The surge of anger that fills her chest is oddly comforting, and she has to bite back the urge to take Moira's head off. Some logical part of her understands her reasoning, especially if it was regarding the kid Oliver had been before the island, but to continue keeping it from him? His own child? Especially after seeing what he's like with Ellie?

It's sort of amazing that she used to be afraid of this woman.

"He'd be six right now," the older Oliver offers. Felicity turns to find him staring at his younger self, a tender compassion lining his face. "It was… a very long time before I got the chance to be the sort of father he deserved. Some of that was circumstance and just… really bad timing. Some of it was my fault. And some of it was his mother's… A lot of it was his mother's, actually, but…" He smiles, and this one is full of fatherly pride. "He's a great kid. He deserves a dad. He deserves the chance to be a brother to your baby. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

The words are ominous, but Ellie doesn't give them a chance to sink in.

"William's a really good brother," she chimes. "Even if he's only a halfway brother and he's so big he's almost a grownup. He's *huge*, just like Daddy!" The older Oliver chuckles, but it's the only sound as the rest of them stare at the little girl, still dumbfounded at this revelation. She grins at the younger Oliver. "Can we go see him, Daddy?"

It's too much for him.

With a pained gasp, Oliver's eyes drop and he sinks back in his chair, dropping Felicity's hand. He's overwhelmed and ashamed and Felicity *hates* it.

"It's not your fault," Felicity whispers, releasing Ellie to cup Oliver's cheek. She turns his face towards hers. He fights her, just enough pressure to keep his head bowed, but she doesn't let him go. When he doesn't open his eyes, she uses more force until he finally looks at her. The tears there are almost too much for her, and she has to bite the inside of her lip to keep her own at bay. If she could take away some

of the pain he's feeling right now, she would. But the most she can do is share it. If he lets her. "This is not your fault."

He shakes his head. "Felicity, you don't have to…"

"Hey, no, none of that," she interrupts. She's not going to let him carry this alone, not for one second. Especially because he's acting like he's the one who'd kept this secret all this time. Like this is somehow his fault. Like it's because of him that this is happening *now*. He couldn't be more wrong. "It's okay, Oliver. It will be okay. We'll be okay. We'll figure it out, like we always do. There's so much going on right now - too much - but this is your son, Oliver. And whatever you want to do, however you want to handle this, we'll do it. *Together*."

His eyes never leave hers, even when his tears threaten to fall. It's good, it's a sign, but she needs to hear him say it.

"Okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," he croaks with a hard nod. Her heart soars as he stares at her, letting her see that he is right there with her. "Yeah."

Felicity smiles and he grips her hand cupping his jaw, squeezing her fingers tightly to show his gratitude. He slides it over his cheek, and presses a solid, lingering kiss to her palm. Oliver takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, pinching them tightly with his fingers. He swipes away a few sorrowful, stressed tears that slip by before scrubbing his palms over his face as he tries to reorient himself.

It's too much right now. Of all the times to find this out, it has to be *right now*.

She doesn't blame the older Oliver, not in the least.

No, she blames Moira.

"Oliver…" his mother starts again.

Felicity instantly turns a hard glare on her. "He's going to need some time," she says, her tone leaving no room for argument. "I think he deserves that, don't you?"

Moira looks a little stunned - something that sends a streak of pride through Felicity - but she doesn't argue. The older woman nods, backing down in a humbled way that seems foreign for the Queen matriarch. She *should*, because in the long list of sins the woman has,

this has to be amongst the worst that don't involve mass murder. It's a tiny victory, but Felicity takes it. She needs it after the day they've already had.

As Moira finally breaks eye contact, Felicity's eyes switch to the older Oliver. He's staring at her with something akin to pride and wonder etched in his features.

"This is how it should have happened," he says. "If it had to happen at all. I should have had you at my side from the beginning. I've always needed you by my side."

Felicity frowns. "Where else would I be?"

He just shakes his head in response, affection so heavy in his gaze that it feels like a physical touch.

"Don't ever lie to her, Oliver," the older version tells his younger self. The words make her jerk - he'd lied to her? About this? Her Oliver looks up at that, meeting the older man's gaze. "Not ever. Not about anything. No matter what the stakes are or what anyone threatens. It's not worth it. *Ever*. You will always be better together than apart."

The younger Oliver nods in agreement, and when Felicity looks at him, he turns to meet her gaze. The words have hit home. Whatever mistakes they make - and they will make some, surely, probably a lot - they will be their own. Felicity knows with absolute certainty that they are not beholden to the pitfalls that plagued the previous versions of themselves.

And she is so, so grateful for that.

"So," Barry says, clearing his throat. "That changed things."

"They were already changed," the future Oliver points out. "Malcolm's dead. Thea's… infected. My mother's alive."

"And the mayor," Felicity adds.

That has an amused smile lighting up his face, although she can't venture a guess as to why, exactly.

"And the mayor," he agrees with a nod, his smile growing. The look he sends Barry is full of a meaning that none of them can possibly grasp. "I think it's pretty clear at this point that they're on a different path than we went."

"Yeah," Barry agrees, hesitation clear in his voice before he sighs. "And it does explain why we had so much trouble getting through."

"It does," Oliver agrees. "You didn't have any problems the first time, right?"

"No," the other man says. Felicity agrees - she won't ever forget the shock of that moment, a sudden gush of air and a streak of red… a tiny whimper from the little girl he was holding. She runs her hand down Ellie's arm and her daughter hums with contentment, leaning back against her as Barry continues. "That was easy. That was just time travel. But later…"

"Later what?" Felicity asks. "Why was it harder later?"

Barry and the future Oliver look at each other, and Felicity already knows she isn't going to like the answer that follows.

"Time wants to happen," Oliver tells her. "And there are some events that can't change."

The words are uncomfortably similar to the ones Malcolm had used when he'd been in the lair with them a few weeks ago. And they do nothing to help her understand, just like they hadn't then.

"Okay…" she says.

"So what happens when they *do* change?" Barry continues, moving to stand with the Oliver from his time. "What happens when Moira lives or Malcolm dies or you have another child?"

"I don't know," Felicity replies, frustration leaking into her voice. "That's why I'm asking you."

"Little changes that don't matter in the long run might get glazed over," Oliver says. "But the big things… Those are impactful. *Hugely* impactful. And, as a result, we think that time splinters."

She furrows her brow, wariness edging her thoughts as she tries to make sense of that. This is all a bit above her pay grade, but it almost makes sense. It tickles at the edges of her memory with a vague sense of familiarity, like maybe she'd read a theory in a journal somewhere that fell in line with this. Understanding is on the tip of her tongue, but she can't quite reach it. And she isn't sure she wants to.

"There are other Earths, other realities," Barry fills in. "I've been to one

before. We think maybe this is how they're created. Time splinters and can't repair itself. Once so much has changed from the original timeline, it can't realign. Your reality starts to vibrate at a completely different frequency, because it's separate, it's broken apart from the original timeline. It's still happening at the same time, but now it's just… on a different plane of existence."

"It explains why we couldn't get through at first," Oliver adds. "It wasn't just time you were trying to break through, Barry. It was worlds, too."

"So it's like…" Felicity blinks, her mind spinning the explanation over and over. She absently thanks the TV gods that she watched so much sci-fi over the years and has a lifelong love for Nova on PBS. "What, an alternate reality now?"

It makes sense, more than she thought it would, harkening back to Everett's MWI theory. But that it's happening to her - to *her* reality in a measurable way - that makes it oddly terrifying. It's easier to process through the television screen, happening to other people, theoretical or imaginary people, people she can feel empathy towards, but not really commiserate with.

"Yeah," Barry says with a nod. "You could say that. There was too much that was different so this world… branched off. Made its own."

"But they came from the same source?" Felicity asks. "Is that why you're still able to come here? Because it's not just time travel, right? Time travel means you're staying within your own timeline, but you're not now. It's like… it's world travel. That makes it sound like it's as easy as hopping on a jet and traipsing around the world, which I highly doubt is the case…"

"I know what you're saying," Barry interrupts, stepping closer. "Like parallel universes."

"But not," Felicity adds. "Because they splintered off."

"It's the idea behind the many-worlds interpretation," Barry says, validating her earlier suspicions.

"Yes," Felicity interjects with a ridiculous amount of triumph. She sits up a little taller, ready to dive in. She's oblivious to the confused looks around them as she talks with Barry. "Or the one where they interact? So every quantum movement is like a cause and effect?"

"Something like that," Barry agrees. "It's the idea that every decision, every movement, every step has a different reaction, right? So in the original timeline, you and Oliver didn't get together for another year - longer, actually, and even then, it took a while…"

The older Oliver lets out an aggravated sigh, saying, "Barry…"

"Sorry," the other man says, shooting him an apologetic look, "that's not the point. The point is that in that timeline, you didn't get together for a while, but in this one, you did. And it was a big enough decision that it created a new timeline. A new reality."

"Especially because it triggered other changes, too," Felicity continues. "If everything had stayed the same - like Malcolm and…" She glances at Moira. "And other things, then it might not have happened?"

"Or it could have," Barry says with a shrug. "I don't know. Some things are small enough that it doesn't have a ripple effect - time sort of makes up for it in its own way because the major events haven't changed course. But when they do…"

"It creates a new reality," she finishes.

"Yeah."

Which would explain why Ellie hadn't flickered, she realizes, not like she had all those weeks ago. If their reality has split, then her existence was no longer in jeopardy when *this* Oliver's life was put in peril. It's comforting knowing the reason *why*… until another thought hits her. It slithers down her spine like ice down the back of her shirt as a notion far more terrifying than Ellie leaving hits her full on.

Her eyes fly to the older Oliver, widening with panic. "What if this changes too much?" she asks, the tremor in her voice not fully encompassing the terror that's filling her. Her voice gets louder as she unwittingly clutches Ellie tighter. "What if us being together earlier and so many changes… *knowing* she happens… What if that makes it so she doesn't? God, what if she's never born? What if she's never conceived in the first place? What if-"

"September third," the older Oliver says, cutting her off mid-spiral.

"What?" Felicity asks, blinking at him with absolutely no comprehension. "But… you said her birthday's May seventeenth, right? What does…" There's a long pause where her brain scrambles to catch up with everything, but the dots don't connect.

The older version of her boyfriend smiles at her with amused patience. "It is on May seventeenth," he replies slowly.

"So September third is…"

"The day you need to conceive her," he finishes with a small laugh.

Oh. Right. Of course. Still…

"You can't *possibly* know that for certain," she argues, because what if he's wrong? What if he's off a day or he got the numbers mixed up or…

"Oh, believe me, I can," Oliver counters. The lines at the corners of his eyes crinkle with amusement. It's stupidly attractive, to the point that her heart actually flutters. It only tells her with absolute certainty that she's going to be even *more* attracted to him as years go by and *wow* is that a thing to know so clearly at the outset of a relationship. "You'd been out of town on business for two weeks before that and I got injured the next day, which limited… everything for a while. I am absolutely positive it's September third. Of 2017," he adds when she opens her mouth to continue.

He knows her too well. That'd been her next question.

Felicity lets out soft, "Okay," as she nods. That's actually a bit hopeful and it eases some of her worries. So on September third of 2017, she and Oliver need to have sex. Like they *need* to. Come hell or high water, or city-wide emergency. She doesn't care what's going on that day, it needs to happen. Maybe she should line up babysitting for baby number one now.

"Good," Felicity says. "That's good to know. Although there are still variables. Are we talking early morning, or was it at night, or…"

There's no real shift in him, nothing overt anyhow, but it suddenly feels very much like he's trying to draw her in… and he's succeeding. He leans in, his voice lowering a few notes, sending a shiver of an entirely different sort down her spine.

"I can't promise you that," he says. Felicity stops breathing because, goddamn him, he's smirking and it's making her stomach feel warm in a way that doesn't feel all that appropriate. "It could have been when I woke you up that morning, or maybe just after breakfast when you decided it would be worth it to be late to work, or when I brought you lunch, or in the bunker before I left that night. You're just gonna have

to cover all your bases, I guess."

All she can manage is a soft, "*Oh*…" because he's effectively short-circuited her brain, from the salacious promise in his voice to the vivid guarantee that their future selves can't keep their hands off each other.

The future Oliver looks a little pleased with himself, right up until *her* Oliver clears his throat. The look instantly disappears and he shoots his younger self a sheepish look of apology.

"So…" Felicity shakes her head, placing a hand on her overheated neck. She dares a glance at the older Oliver before looking back at Barry. "How does time travel work, if it's a different reality? And how *do* you travel through time, Barry? How does that…"

"When I run fast enough, I generate an energy, something that lets me step out of my current time and into others." When she furrows her brow, seeking more explanation than that vagueness, he continues, using his hands to articulate what he's describing. "It's like running through a black hole, I guess? I can see things, see spots in time. It took me a while to control it…" He snorts, looking around. "Which I'm obviously still working on, but it's gotten easier to pinpoint certain moments and… stop there."

"Wow," is all she can manage.

"Yeah," he says, "definitely wow. I've been to the past and the future. I've even been to another world, completely different than ours." He grins, an almost childish delight lighting up his eyes as he opens his mouth to say something more before changing his mind, obviously deeming it something he shouldn't share right now. A disappointment borne purely from scientific interest fills Felicity's chest, but he doesn't pause. "It was different, very different. And to get there I had to wear something that gave me enough power. But getting here…" He glances at the older Oliver. "It just took more concentration, because it was the same reality, but now it's just… a little bit off."

"Wow," she repeats, looking at the future Oliver and then hers. The look on his face matches the one on his older self's, so much so that it's almost a little freaky. He grasps the idea, but he's not entirely following the fine details. She's not sure she is entirely either - because *wow* - but it doesn't matter. Felicity looks down at the toddler in her lap, where her head is rolling against Felicity's chest. Ellie's chewing on her bottom lip, her eyes fixed on the wall behind Barry and her

father, content to be lost in her own thoughts after finally eating. Felicity taps her nose with a, "Who knew you were so powerful, Ellie-bug?"

She angles her head back to look up at her from under her beautiful little lashes. The back of her skull digs into Felicity's collarbone as she shrugs, looking amazingly adorable and ridiculously young with tiny smears of dried ketchup and the faint remnants of her chocolate milk mustache.

The second Felicity meets her daughter's eyes, her heart climbs up her throat, and the reality of what has to happen next hits her all over again.

Closing her eyes with an unsteady sigh, Felicity leans down and kisses her forehead. When Ellie just closes her eyes, melting even further against Felicity's chest, it's obvious that the naptime she'd been arguing against earlier is much closer on the horizon than she'd thought it would be.

But it won't be happening here.

The magic of how any of this is possible at all fades into the background as that hits her.

It doesn't hurt any less, but this time she's more prepared for it.

She's not sure what's worse - that she's starting to accept that this has to happen, or that it has to happen at all.

Tears burning her eyes, Felicity wraps her up tightly. She curls around her, pressing her face into Ellie's neck. "I love you, baby girl," she whispers. "So, so, *so* much. I always will."

Ellie's red-stained fingers hold onto Felicity's arms as she replies, "I love you, too, Momma."

Her Oliver leans over them, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. He presses a kiss to the side of Felicity's neck before kissing Ellie's head, pressing his face into her soft curls. A single hot tear lands on the exposed skin of Felicity's throat, the only sign that Oliver's crying.

"I don't want to let her go," she whispers to him, as much to acknowledge the pain of what's happening - what has to happen - as realizing that the time for it is quickly closing in. The men from the future can't stay here forever, and they can't leave without the little

girl in her arms… no matter how much she doesn't want to let her go.

Oliver nods against her, his breath hitching. "Neither do I," he breathes, the words coming out in a cracked gasp as he holds her tighter, wrapping her and Ellie up in his arms as tight as he can.

It's the first time he's outright said anything like that since his future self and Barry arrived, and Felicity couldn't stop her tears even if she wanted to. She squeezes her eyes shut, her shoulders shaking with her silent cries.

His tears are hot against her skin. He just holds her tighter.

Ellie is quiet between them, somehow understanding that while this involves her, this moment isn't for her. She just holds onto her mother, one of her hands moving to grasp Oliver's arm.

Felicity isn't sure how long they stay like that.

She hears movement around her, hears soft voices, but she ignores them. She ignores the way her back starts to ache, the way her chest burns with anguish, the way her stomach turns with the familiar tug of nausea that is definitely from the tiny life growing inside her. She ignores all of it, focusing on savoring the feeling of her little family in her arms for the last time. It is a comfort knowing that this isn't forever - it can't be, she refuses to even think so - but it doesn't make it any easier. She wants to look up, to tell Oliver's future self how grateful she is that he's giving them this moment, to look at Barry and thank him for bringing Ellie here to them in the first place, for giving them this beautiful opportunity, but she can't. Not yet.

They just sit in each other's arms, holding on as long as they can.

It's Oliver who finally pulls away, and his movement prompts hers. Felicity sits up, smoothing Ellie's hair down where it sticks to her wet cheeks. Oliver wipes his face, sniffling slightly. He pauses long enough to press his hand to the side of Felicity's head, pulling her closer to kiss her cheek before he looks down at their daughter.

He laughs - *really* laughs - at the mess all over her face and hands.

"What?" Ellie asks, looking up at him with adoring curiosity.

"You," he says, leaning over to kiss her messy cheek, "are a mess, Ellie-bug. I think you got more food on you than in your mouth."

"Nuh-uh," she denies, which only makes Oliver laugh more.

"C'mere," he says, moving to pick her up. As loathe as Felicity is to let her go, she doesn't have the same reaction she did when his future self had reached for Ellie. She doesn't stop touching her though, her hands lingering as Ellie reaches for Oliver as well. He picks her up in one smooth motion as he stands, pushing his chair back. He hikes his daughter closer, straightening the sleeve of her dress where it's ridden up. "How about we get you cleaned up?"

The words are innocent enough, but none of them miss the unspoken part of that sentence:

'*Before you go back home.*'

Felicity wants to close her eyes, to hide from the pain of it, but she can't take her eyes off of them. Her hand lingers on Ellie's back as Oliver moves to step around her, heading towards the sink. When they get too far for her to reach, Oliver captures Felicity's hand, squeezing it once before letting her go.

She spins in her chair, her eyes following them.

It's clear that the action is evening Oliver out. His face is still taut with a tense anxiety, all too aware of where this is leading, but he's also taking this moment to revel. He's still with his daughter and that's all that matters.

Oliver sets her on the counter next to the sink, making sure she's secure before he turns the faucet on. "Some silly girl has chocolate milk all over her face," he says, testing the temperature of the water as he winks at Ellie. "And look at all that ketchup."

"I love ketchup," Ellie replies, swinging her legs.

"You are a walking billboard of that fact, Ellie-bug," Oliver replies with a grin before grabbing the soap bottle. "Hands."

In a practiced move, Ellie leans over and cups her hands for Oliver to pour a dollop of soap into them. It's something they'd perfected a while ago, after Ellie's insistence on helping in the kitchen became a regular thing.

The little girl leans further over, aiming for the water and Oliver helps steady her as she starts scrubbing her hands. It's sloppy and she misses most of the mess. His large hands cover her tiny ones, helping clean

them off as they whisper something back and forth that Felicity can't quite hear from where she is. She doesn't need to though, because this is enough. Knowing that they're having one more moment, a stolen few seconds where he can just *be* with his daughter, it's more than enough.

Felicity stares at them, blinking her tears away so she doesn't miss a thing. It's a sight that will stay with her for a long, long time.

She watches them rinse her hands and then he grabs one of the towels hanging off a small rack near the sink. He lets Ellie dry her hands as he pulls a paper towel free and wets it before cleaning her face.

It's the perfect picture of happy domesticity.

Felicity doesn't realize her hands moved to cover her stomach until she hears a choked sound from behind her. She glances back to find the older version of Oliver watching her with a sorrow-lined serenity.

More tears blur her vision as she smiles at him. When he smiles back, she has to force herself to take a steady breath.

It's time.

Every inch of her wants to fight this… but at the same time, she knows it's not her place to fight it. She curls her fingers into her dress where her hand rests over her stomach.

"All better?" Ellie asks and Felicity glances back in time to see her daughter beaming up at her Oliver with such pure happiness that it actually hurts.

"All better," Oliver replies, his grin matching hers.

For the split second before he moves, Felicity can see his emotions threatening to take over in the way his chest hitches and his face tightens to keep them at bay. And then he's leaning forward, kissing Ellie's forehead. When that earns him a giggle from the little girl, he starts peppering kisses down the side of her face to her cheek, making her break out in peals of laughter.

"That tickles, Daddy," Ellie says, her hands landing on his stubbled cheeks to push him away.

"I'm sorry," he says. Felicity hears the crack in his voice. He takes a deep breath and picks Ellie up. He stares down at her for a beat, his

eyes dancing over her little features, taking the time to memorize as much as he can about this moment. And then he looks up at her… and then to his future self. "Okay."

The older Oliver nods at him. "Okay." His voice is gritty again, just as uneven as when he'd first arrived, when he'd first spoken to Ellie.

As her Oliver makes her way back over, Felicity stands. Her legs are like liquid and she has to grip the chair to keep herself from collapsing. She watches them come towards her, her legs instantly steadying when they're within reach. She runs her hands over Ellie's hair and down her back.

"Thank you," the future Oliver says, looking at his younger self and then Felicity. "This wouldn't have-"

His words are cut off, drowned out by the sudden ear-splitting sound of the tachyon detector going off again.

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

> We cannot begin to express how emotional this chapter made us. While in many ways this is the penultimate chapter, at least thematically, we do have three more chapters to go. Even after that, there's a whole lot more story in this universe for us to tell. But we aren't done here yet and we actually don't leave this one in a cliffhanger. Those who have said they've found recent chapters too overwhelming emotionally might want to consider waiting and reading the last few chapters all in one go. For those of you soldiering through... We would loan you some tissues but we used them all. ~Love, Janis and Bre

"*Okay."*

He's drowning.

Oliver holds his daughter close as he carries her back over to where Felicity and his future self stand. Each step makes the pressure in his chest increase, until there's nothing left but his heart inundating his system with the wild urge to never let her go. It'd been easier when Felicity had been holding her, because then he could focus on what had to be done. Even when he'd picked Ellie up and taken her to clean her hands and face, he'd been fine…

Until now.

Because the next step is handing his daughter back to her true father, and the only thing his body is capable of doing is simply moving towards him… No, it's towards Felicity. And while his mind is telling his hands to let Ellie go, they actually tighten with each passing second.

The same desperation he saw in Felicity's every move suddenly roars to life in him.

Oliver grits his teeth and forces himself to close his eyes, to re-center himself. He takes a quick breath, making himself inhale all the way so that his chest expands, pushing against Ellie where she's nestled in his arms.

Where she won't be in a few short minutes.

Tears burn his eyes and he blinks them back, swallowing hard against the way they seem to clog his throat. He ignores the suffocation making his lungs feel like they're lined in lead. If he gives in now, he knows, he might not let her go and he can't do that. He can't do that to Ellie, he can't do that to his future self… and he can't do that to Felicity. She needs him, she needs him to be strong so they can get through this together.

Felicity stands, taking a step towards him when he reaches for her. She grasps at his arm where he holds Ellie, the other reaching up to run up and down her back. Her tired eyes are shiny with tears, and she purses her lips to keep them at bay.

She's so strong, his Felicity, and not for the first time since the older version of himself arrived, he realizes how much he's going to need her, too. It's amazing to think that a few months ago something like this would have had him running for the hills. Maybe it's the fact that he isn't alone, that he has Felicity by his side, or that he knows they'll see Ellie again - he *knows* it, in his bones - but the urge to bury everything and disappear isn't there.

He almost chokes out a little laugh at that thought - maybe he really has changed… and it's all because of this beautiful little girl who literally blew into their lives, turning everything upside down.

Oliver smiles down at her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Thank you."

He looks up to find his future self watching them. The older man holds his gaze, conveying everything in those two words. It's no less jarring than the first time he saw himself. It's nearly like looking in the mirror - the features are the same, for the most part - but it's also like looking at a completely different person. There's a distinctly changed air about him, a lightness. The darkness that Oliver had been so damn positive was in his future is nowhere to be seen.

Maybe it's seeing the actual physical evidence of himself *happy* in the future - with Felicity, with his family - that's making him want to stay, to stand tall, to *feel*. It's like what happened with Ellie. It's one thing to hope and wonder and assume that his future is one thing. It's an entirely different thing when he actually *sees* it.

The older Oliver's eyes switch to Felicity, and his face softens with wonder and affection and love. Oliver knows it's because he sees his own wife in her, especially because of how she is with Ellie. He knows

it because he feels the same thing when he looks at her. And yet, he still feels the strangest jealousy stirring in the pit of his stomach. His older self rouses something a little different from her, and while it's something that they have to look forward to in their future, it's still *different.*

And it makes the hair on the back of his neck rise up a little bit.

The very notion that he's jealous of himself is impossible to comprehend. He can't even fathom a way to wrap his mind around something like that.

"This wouldn't have-" the older man starts.

He doesn't get the chance to finish.

The sudden ear-splitting sound of the tachyon detector draped around Ellie's neck goes off again.

It pierces through Oliver's eardrums, a knife of noise that makes his heart stop just before it takes off again, flooding his system with adrenaline.

Everything happens in the blink of an eye.

Blood pounds through him, carrying with it the fear and horror that he'd felt the first time the alarm went off. But this time there's only one possibility left… and the feeling of his daughter grabbing hold of him, trying to get closer - to get *away* from the sound, from what it means - only makes the possibility more real.

Zoom.

He twists his body to protect Ellie, his hands coming up to cover her head as her little ones snap to her ears. Even through the screaming noise coming from the detector, he can hear her shouts of fright - "*Daddy! Daddy!"* - and he doesn't have to look down to know her eyes are wide with fear.

One second he's holding her and in the next, he's grabbing Felicity and pulling her behind him, shoving their daughter into her arms before spinning to face the threat. He crowds her back until they hit the dining room table. It's not enough, not nearly.

Especially when he sees the telltale rip in time starting in the center of the kitchen again.

Flashes of blue light - *lightning* - shine through, followed by the same clawed hand he remembers vividly from the last time Zoom had tried to push his way into the kitchen. God, it's just like before. He can see the hint of the man behind the mask - if he's a man at all - but it's mostly his eyes that come through. They're a shining black, filled with malice and a delighted violence that makes Oliver's insides curdle…

And they're honed in on Ellie.

"No," he whispers.

Zoom reaches through, and this time there isn't a barrier holding him back.

There's *nothing* holding him back.

He isn't sure when everyone else moves, but in one instant his older self is at his side, facing the growing tear along with him. He mirrors Oliver's stance, angry power radiating off of him. It shouldn't be surprising that Oliver and his future self are perfectly in-sync, but the ease with which they fall in-line together is startling. They move fluidly, like an extension of each other, both alert and on edge, both ready to do absolutely anything to protect Felicity and Ellie. From the corner of his eye, Oliver spots Barry flashing to their side, his hand on Felicity's arm, like he's ready to bolt with her and Ellie in an instant.

Oliver's about to turn and shout at Barry to do just that - to go, to take them and run as far away from here as he can - when the hole suddenly rips wide and Zoom steps through.

A chill rips down Oliver's spine as he finally comes face-to-face with the man trying to kill his daughter.

The tear instantly seals and the alarm ceases, leaving nothing behind but a hideous ringing.

Oliver doesn't realize he's trying to move backwards until he steps on Felicity's toes, until she gasps, her hand scrabbling over his back, looking for purchase, for something to hold onto aside from the kitchen table. She's whispering something he can't hear to Ellie as his daughter's sobs slowly take the place of the ringing in Oliver's ears.

He can hear Felicity's fear as loud as if she were shouting it.

The masked man standing before them is terrifying. The cuts he'd glimpsed before are like jagged scars ripped into the leather, like the

evil inside couldn't be contained. It's coarse and ugly; the blue lightning that dances across the surface of his suit only amplifies that impression. It's nothing compared to his eyes, though. They're a shock of white against the black; the pupils are dark and wide, dancing with light flickers of blue as they stare right at Ellie.

A horrible kind of excitement fills them as the mask *moves*… into a smile. Of *triumph*. It moves like a second skin with his face, the leather creaking into a bone-chilling line of fiendish delight.

He thinks he's won.

No, he *knows* it.

It's a sight that will haunt Oliver for years to come, because in that second, he almost believes it.

No.

He'll die before he lets anything happen to his little girl.

"I thought you said he couldn't get through," Oliver grits out at his older self, never taking his eyes off of Zoom. The monster of a man only has eyes for Ellie. Oliver squeezes his hands so tightly into fists that his nails start biting into his palms. "How…?"

"He must have followed us," Barry replies. "He must have come through the same breach."

It *had* been in the same exact spot. He'd been waiting, for a moment just like this. This was going to happen no matter what.

That thought has fear swamping him again, sending an icy chill radiating to every single muscle in his body, every single nerve. How long had he been waiting, biding his time, knowing he'd get a moment where he could strike when this little girl was most vulnerable? The horrifying part, Oliver realizes, is that it hasn't mattered who was with Ellie. The man standing before him is entirely unaffected by the stronghold surrounding this little girl, because he knows he can get around them. Oliver thought he'd been protecting her, but it hadn't been him - it'd been the barrier. All the times Zoom had been reaching through, all the times he was *so close* to Ellie, it hadn't mattered because the barrier *had* been in place.

Until his future self and Barry came through. Until they left the door open for him.

It's too much to process, too much to think about.

Acid crawls up his throat and he nearly chokes on it. His lungs are damn near useless.

He's scared. No, he's *terrified*. Beyond words. Beyond anything he's ever felt in his life. Because what if he's not enough? What if *they're* not enough? Their future selves literally had to send her back in time to get away from this monster, to keep her safe, and despite their efforts, Zoom still found a way to chase her. He still found a way to get to her. All they'd done was buy some time, but it's not nearly enough.

What if Zoom gets his clawed hands on Ellie, and he takes her? God, what if he kills her right here? Right now?

The image that flashes through his mind is so abhorrent that he nearly throws up right there.

And then Oliver hears Ellie's whimper.

His entire body tightens with a primordial anger that completely eradicates the fear. It burns through him, and he shifts, moving to launch himself at the danger to his daughter before Felicity's harried, "Oliver," stops him. Her hand suddenly grabs his arm, like she can feel the change in him, and it's the only thing that keeps him from launching himself at Zoom.

That and Ellie's hand following suit, her hand tugging at his shoulder, like she's trying to keep him close.

It's *jarring*, the emotional landscape he's dangling from, and *distracting* - he's never faced an opponent that's inspired this mixture of fear and horror and pure rage.

He wants to *move*, to do *something*, but his survival instincts suddenly kick in - he doesn't have a weapon. None of them do. Even if he did move, he wouldn't get far, and it would do more damage than good. He can't give Zoom the upper hand and moving - *exposing* Ellie - would do just that. No, he needs to be controlled, strategic…

A dark chuckle cuts through his thoughts, echoing through the room like broken thunder.

"Elizabeth Queen," Zoom intones slowly, in a voice that seems as otherworldly as he is. He tilts his head, the intensity in his eyes

growing with an alacrity that makes Oliver's blood run cold. "You. Can't. Hide. From. Me."

"Oh my God," Felicity whispers, holding onto Oliver tighter. He slips his hand back, grabbing hers, tangling their fingers together. He squeezes hard, telling her he won't let anything happen to their daughter.

But the little girl is a force to be reckoned with all on her own.

"*Go away*!" Ellie shrieks back. "My Daddys are gonna beat you, bad man!"

The next chuckle that echoes from behind the mask is so unbothered, so deeply unaffected, and it sets Oliver even further on edge… but not as much as the words that come next.

"If that were true, Elizabeth," Zoom says, his gravelly voice sneaking under Oliver's skin, making it crawl, "it would be them I was after."

The meaning of that seeps in.

Oliver's vaguely aware that the older version of himself has frozen in place, isn't even breathing as they reach the same conclusion: this man - this *monster* - is chasing Ellie across time and space because at some point, she's the one who defeats him. She is the one who finds a way to stop him, to potentially kill him, to end his life, or at the very least his reign of terror.

A burst of pride clashes with the heavy fall of horror and guilt in Oliver's gut. The conflicting feelings whip through him. He wants only the very best of futures for Ellie. He wants her to have everything the world has to offer, everything from the banal things like an education and love, but also being happy… being *normal*. Not having to live her life on the edge of darkness like he does just by virtue of being The Arrow. That is the last thing he wants for his daughter. And while he is exceedingly proud at the mere *hint* of the kind of person she ultimately becomes, he can't help the sorrow that wells up at the notion that it's who she *has* to be. That her life leads her into fights with this sort of monster. She is pure joy and lightness.

He never wants to see this sort of evil stain her life.

"Only you matter," Zoom continues, lifting a clawed hand, pointing at the little girl. He doesn't take his eyes off her as he adds, "Give her to me now."

"Never," Oliver snaps just as his older self growls, "That will never happen." His voice is thick with the promise of what will happen if Zoom comes any closer. The response does catch Zoom's interest, though, and he slowly turns his focus to the future Oliver. "We will never let you lay a hand on her. *Never*."

Another chuckle, one even more terrifying than the last, slithers past his lips before he takes a step towards them. It's the tiniest movements, barely a shuffle, but it has a ripple effect that's felt through the entire room.

Everyone instantly responds, both he and his future self crowding around Felicity from the front while Barry protects her back. Oliver swears he catches hints of movement behind him, although he's a hundred percent sure it's more wishful than anything - wishful that Barry would just *take* Ellie and Felicity and go, wishful that they get as far away from here as possible, that the distance is enough to save them.

For now.

And then what?

"You are a gnat, Oliver Queen," Zoom says. His eyes take his future self in before switching to Oliver. He's unaffected by the prospect of two of them; it's so obvious he doesn't see a threat when he looks their way. "You are an annoyance buzzing in my ear. Nothing more."

Movement catches in the corner of his eye, and Oliver forces himself not to look at his mother, who is inching along the kitchen island, moving for the butcher block. Neither he nor his older self has a bow, but that doesn't mean there isn't something they can use. Knives are far from Oliver's ideal weapon, but they're still a weapon.

After all… if it worked once with Slade…

Zoom takes another step, yanking Oliver's attention back to him. He practically falls over himself as he urges Felicity to move around the table. Zoom just watches them. He's *toying* with them, Oliver realizes, letting them think they can get away. And can they, even if they try?

"You can't stop me," he continues, the promise in his voice resonating. "You can barely survive me."

Maybe.

Oliver takes an unsteady breath. Maybe that's true, but it doesn't matter. And it doesn't change that maybe they can't *alone*… but together?

It's an advantage they don't usually have.

Their resolve thickens the air, and Zoom seems to sense it. The smile slithers off his face, the mask resettling in its garish scarred grin that promises pain. "Give her to me," he says. The blue lightning crackles around him, growing with intensity. "*Now*."

"Oliver," Felicity whispers out, a rush of air in a terrified voice.

"Barry," Oliver grits out in a hushed tone. "Take them and go."

"No," Felicity instantly snaps, and she digs her nails into Oliver's arm. "I'm not…"

"*Barry*," the future Oliver says, interrupting her, raising his voice. The lightning around Zoom crackles, slicing through the air, filling the room with a malignant energy that Oliver feels pressing into him. "Go."

"Oliver-"

"*Now!*" he shouts, and then his future self is moving, and Oliver is right behind him.

But they aren't fast enough. Not even close.

One second Zoom is standing before them and the next he's simply *gone*. He blinks and before he even gets the chance to open his eyes, he feels a heavy whoosh of air followed by the echo of blue lightning.

Ellie screams. It's filled with pure unadulterated fear and pain, and before Oliver can react, Felicity's scream joins hers.

He thought he'd been scared earlier. It's nothing compared to what washes through him at the sound of the woman he loves and his child screaming in fear.

"No!" Oliver shouts, spinning back to face them, but he's still not fast enough.

Before he can do *anything*, he sees a clash of red and blue dancing before him as Barry grabs Felicity and Ellie and *runs*. But he doesn't get far, because Zoom suddenly snatches Barry out of thin air, forcing

him to drop his precious cargo.

Felicity falls to the ground with a shout, barely twisting in time to keep herself from landing on Ellie. A whole new brand of fear runs rampant through him for an entirely different reason - *the baby* - but he doesn't have time to focus on it because she's already up and moving, scrambling across the kitchen floor with Ellie in her arms. Her arm's covered in blood from where Zoom had sliced through her jacket, and it's not just hers - he got Ellie, too. Her little arm is covered in thick scratches that are bleeding freely.

A few inches higher and it would have been her throat.

It's that realization that has Oliver moving faster than he ever has in his life. And it's not just him - his future self is right there with him.

"Run!" the older Oliver yells as they throw themselves between them and the tangle of red and blue that's rolling through the kitchen. Felicity's already moving, not having to be told even once, but the shout draws the wrong attention. Suddenly Barry is left standing in the middle of the floor, one half of his face covered in a vicious swollen red bruises from Zoom's punches, and then he's moving to catch Zoom where he's gone after Felicity and Ellie.

God, Oliver can't even *see* him move.

Somehow Barry gets there first. He snatches Felicity and Ellie and moves just before Zoom catches them. They're no more than a blur of mottled color and a panicked cry as Barry races to take them out another way… but Zoom is right there with them, a black fog of motion that cuts off doorways and windows, any prospective exit point.

It goes on forever, or it feels that way in spite of the fact that it only takes a few seconds. Zoom chases Barry through the room, and all Oliver can do is watch with a sickening sense of helplessness. Zoom gets close, too close, far too often, and the only evidence Oliver has of it is the pained cries from either Felicity or Ellie.

Oliver tries to help, but he can't keep up, and as he watches everything around him falling apart, he lets out a frustrated shout that he feels in his bones. He's strong and fast, battle-honed and ready for nearly anything. But not this. This is inhuman, and he doesn't even know where to begin.

But luckily for him, he's not alone.

Years of fighting for his life has taught Oliver to use every advantage he has in his arsenal. Sometimes it's a weapon, or a skill, or his environment. Sometimes it's just him. And it's that simple fact that he will later look back on and realize saved all their lives.

His biggest advantage is himself. Or, rather, his future self.

The future Oliver - Ellie's Oliver - has waged this war before. He knows this opponent, has survived this fight. He might not have won it, but Oliver is smart enough to follow that man's lead, and all it takes is one word:

"*Kiev*."

There'd been more than one fight in Kiev during his Bratva days, but there's only one that mattered. The boeviks he'd taken on were nowhere near the challenge that Zoom presents, but that doesn't matter because Oliver instantly knows what the other man means.

Anticipate.

Stay low.

Use his speed against him.

Oliver doesn't even acknowledge his older self; he just acts. They both do. Oliver dives one way, his doppelganger goes the other, both of them trying to put themselves in Zoom's path as Barry races around the room.

Something - someone - brushes past him, but he doesn't even know who it is. It's a push of the air against him and a blur of color moving so fast he can't even discern who is who. They're near indistinguishable now and when the move gets nowhere, Oliver's heart jumps up into his throat as he shouts again, the desperate, "*No!*" piercing the air. He reaches again for the blurs, but he comes back empty-handed.

No wonder he'd sent Ellie back in time. He couldn't defend her then, just like he can't now. He can't even *catch* this opponent, much less beat him…

Somehow his older self has more luck. And that's exactly what it is, pure luck as he launches himself in the right direction at the right time. It's just a hand around the speedster's ankle, but it's enough to shift things.

Zoom doesn't anticipate the additional weight and he instantly grinds to a halt, turning in a dizzying haze of color to look at the Oliver impeding him. Murderous rage darkens his eyes, his hand rising, but it's a long enough break for his older self to act. The older Oliver doesn't waste the precious second when Zoom pauses. Keeping his hand on him like a vice grip, he uses the opportunity to slam his elbow into the back of their foe's knee in an attempt to flip the man onto the ground.

It's not enough, not even close, and before Oliver can comprehend that, Zoom's already responding. It's a storm of anger and hate that makes Oliver's head spin as Zoom punches his future self with such a loud crack he's positive he's fractured *something*. And he doesn't stop. He rains a blur of hits on the older Oliver's jaw, earning a pained cry that has Oliver's insides revolting as Ellie screams, "*Daddy!*" somewhere in the background.

He doesn't have to think before he launches himself into action.

Oliver snatches the other man's free wrist, holding it as tightly as he can as he wrenches it behind the monster's back. Ellie's still screaming in the background, mixed in with Felicity's horrified shouts, and it's that combination that spurs his older self back into motion. He's bleeding from several cuts across his face, but the future Oliver moves like they aren't even there.

They work in tandem, managing a few good hits, using the element of surprise to their advantage, but it's not long before they start losing ground. They won't lose - they *refuse* - but they can't win either.

Zoom is too good, too fast, too strong, and they're only human.

The slick leather of Zoom's wrist slips through Oliver's fingers at the same exact moment Zoom lands a foot on the other Oliver's elbow, breaking his grasp. And just like that, they lose him. He slips through their grips like oil against their fingertips.

"No," his older self gasps, reaching after him but Zoom's already gone, just as Barry is about to join the fray.

It's only then that Oliver actually registers the fact that Barry hasn't listened.

Felicity and Ellie are still there, backed into a corner near the kitchen table. Felicity's glasses are crooked, her hair a wild mess, and it's nothing compared to Ellie's… and they're both covered in various little

cuts from the close calls from Zoom.

A blur of red has Barry standing before them just in time to force Zoom to a halt.

For a split second, everything stops as the two speedsters face off.

Lightning crackles around both of them, and it's a sight - Zoom in all his terrifying glory, and Barry, wearing nothing but street clothes and a fierce determination that tells Oliver he will do absolutely anything to keep this man from hurting his family.

"Move," Zoom says, dragging the word out. "Or you will die well before your time."

"You aren't getting near them," Barry replies.

Felicity tucks both of them back into the corner, trying to make herself as small as possible as she shields Ellie. She's trying to hide the little girl's face, to keep her from seeing what's going on, but she's stubborn as always, pushing her mother's hand away. Fear and anger color her face, and it's made all the more fierce by the tiny cut on her cheek.

"You're mean!" she shouts at Zoom. "You're mean and a bad man and I'm sad for you! Didn't your momma teach you to be nice?"

A chill suddenly permeates the air. It can't possibly be a physical temperature dip, but it feels that way. Something in Zoom's countenance shifts completely at Ellie's words, like the mere notion of her feeling pity for him demands retaliation.

She stares back at him defiantly, his brave little girl with the fiercest of hearts. She looks right into the very darkest, most soulless eyes Oliver's ever seen and she doesn't flinch.

It suddenly doesn't seem so off-putting that she grows up to kill this man.

Everything happens at once.

Zoom moves in a blur; and, with a shout, Barry moves to meet him. But Zoom is anticipating it and he stops without warning, snatching him out of the air by the throat like he's nothing more than a bothersome fly. He lifts Barry up, his grip on him so tight that they all hear the sound of something cracking. Ellie lets out a startled cry at

that, echoed by Felicity, and they only grow louder when Zoom throws him across the room. Barry slams into a wall, falling to the floor in a gasping heap.

"No!" Oliver shouts, in tandem with his future self, both of them moving to take Barry's place as Zoom moves unhindered towards Ellie.

Felicity shoves herself back, like she can somehow push herself through the wall to get to safety, but there's nowhere to go... and Oliver isn't fast enough. Neither of them are.

He suddenly can't breathe as the reality of what's about to happen hits him. There's nothing he can do about it, nothing he can do to *stop* it…

He's failed them.

And then something moving catches his eye.

It's not Barry - he's struggling to stand, one hand at his throat as he tries to move again - and it's not his older self either that catches his attention.

It's his mother.

Knife in hand, she stands tall, so reminiscent of that first battle with Slade in this very kitchen, and like before, she doesn't hesitate for even an instant before she uses it, throwing the knife with all her might in Zoom's direction. It sails end-over-end, and Oliver instantly knows it won't do the damage she'd intended. The knife is poorly balanced and while her aim is good, her technique is not. Still, it might very well have embedded itself in Zoom's shoulder, if luck were on her side, and had Zoom not turned and *caught it*.

Moira gasps in alarm as the monstrous man turns in the blink of an eye, snatching the knife out of the air. His eyes latch onto her, and a slow smile crawls across his face again.

A new note of terror slices down Oliver's spine.

Time wants to happen. He's been told this again and again. And they've changed things, yes, but his mother had been going to die - she was *supposed* to die - but she didn't… not yet. He can't help the fear that this is time's moment to try and correct that fact.

Zoom's eyes widen slightly, amused delight evident in them, and then he flips the blade and sends it back in Moira's direction, so fast and

with such deadly accuracy that it's a blur all on its own. It happens so fast that Oliver barely has the chance to take a breath, much less to shout a word of warning.

A rush of adrenaline and stark terror render him motionless. He can't hear, can't see, can't *process* a damned thing. It's going to hit. It's going to slam right into his mother and with the speed it was thrown, it doesn't really matter *where*. She's going to die. He's going to watch her die in front of him, and there's nothing he can do to stop it.

The ear-splitting sound of the tachyon detector suddenly goes off… or it's *been* going off, he's not sure. He just barely registers the shrill wail over the blood thrumming in his ears as time splits apart again, a rip in the fabric of reality right between his mother and the oncoming knife.

A hand reaches through and snatches the blade from midair.

"*No*!"

It's Zoom. His voice rings out in a deafening roar that more than overtakes the alarm ringing through the air as the new arrival steps fully into their time. The tear instantly reseals and the alarm ceases, leaving nothing but an echo of Zoom's shout. It's almost fearful, and that, more than anything else, gives him hope.

It strikes Oliver that he's seen the new arrival before - the blonde woman from weeks ago, from when Zoom had tried to breach through time. It's her… and it's most definitely not Sara.

She's tall for a woman, and strikingly beautiful, with a tumble of blonde curls.

But her eyes…

"You should have known better," she says to Zoom, flipping the knife in her hand with a casual ease. Her voice makes Oliver do a double-take, and his gut clenches with familiarity. "You can't have them. I've stopped you before and I'll stop you again. Every time. Throughout time."

He knows her. Oliver *knows* this without a doubt. It's not a feeling of déjà vu or an inkling or anything like that. It's a bone-deep knowledge, something he feels in the foundations of his very being. He *knows* her.

"Ellie?" he breathes out.

The woman's eyes flicker to him and he *knows*. The familiar blue are the same ones he's been staring into for the last month, and they're filled with the same gorgeous light and stubborn determination he's come to know so very well.

A smile tugs at her lips, and he knows before she even opens her mouth that she's his daughter.

"Hi, Dad."

"Oh my God," his older self whispers in a stunned rush of air.

"Dad," she echoes, acknowledging him as well.

It takes barely a few seconds and then she only has eyes for Zoom.

All the softness Oliver had just glimpsed melts away as she faces her enemy. Her face hardens, not in a way that speaks of years of hardship, but in that of a finely-honed warrior, one who has been training her entire life for *this* opponent. One who knows as surely as she knows how to breathe that she's going to win.

She's so absolutely stunning that it takes his breath away.

Ellie falls back into a predatory and well-practiced stance. It's protective as much as it's clear she's ready to bring the fight to Zoom. Power radiates off of her, a confidence that Oliver can only dream of instantly resetting the balance in the room. The dark clothes he'd thought were black the last time he'd seen her are actually a very dark green. Like *his* green. It's leather, like his gear, its stitching taking on a vague arrow pattern, all of it zigzagged with various patched up sections where it's clearly been damaged. The material is worn and well-used, and it's obvious it's seen more than a fight or two. Like her. Like his Ellie.

He'd have to be blind to miss the various scars that litter her skin. Most of them are small and well-healed, but there's one on her cheek - Oliver's mind flashes to the cut on his little Ellie's cheek from Zoom just moments ago - and one jagged one that didn't heal so nicely along the side of her neck.

Oliver wants to throw himself between her and the danger as much as he wants to see what she's capable of. Because he knows it's going to be magnificent… even though it's utterly terrifying.

She suddenly shifts, shoving him back to reality.

Zoom.

Ellie moves just enough to reach a complicated piece of technology that runs up the length of her left sleeve. She presses a few buttons along the inside of her wrist, something that makes Zoom roar in frustration.

"If you're going to fight," Ellie tells him, and God, her lack of fear in the face of this monster terrifies Oliver. "Fight fair."

A bubble of *something* appears out of thin air just above her inner wrist. It moves of its own volition, rippling… It looks like time, like the rips that have torn into their world, but it's different. Controlled.

Before Oliver can grasp what the hell he's even looking at, the sphere suddenly contracts and explodes outward, engulfing the entire room.

It's only then that he realizes Zoom had launched himself at his daughter. The blur of dark blue lightning slams to a stop and, in the blink of an eye, Zoom moves at speeds no greater than Oliver's. It's jarring, enough so that he freezes in shock, his mind taking too long to comprehend that whatever his adult daughter had done, she's tipped the scales greatly in their favor.

And she's already moving.

Ellie's faster than either him or his older self, and she meets Zoom head-on in the middle of the room. It's immediately clear that she knows exactly what she's doing. She moves with a grace and a certainty that comes from years of experience, years of training and preparation, years of being in a battle zone, fighting an enemy that she's had to mold herself in order to defeat. She's *incredible* to watch, despite the urgent feeling filling him to step forward and take her place… to protect her.

But she doesn't need it.

It doesn't matter that she's the little girl he built a pillow castle with and played the role of knight to her fairy kingdom. It doesn't matter that he spent the last month wrapping her up in a cocoon to keep her safe from monsters or that she insisted on Ellie kisses whenever he came back from missions. She's his Ellie-bug, and that won't change, not ever. No matter how old she gets or what version of her he has the honor of being the father to, a part of him will always see her that

way.

But she can handle herself, and the sight of it is breathtaking, rooting him in place.

The sudden scuttle of heels on the floor pulls his attention to find Felicity scurrying along the edge of the room, towards him. Little Ellie's in her arms, wrapped up tight, and Felicity doesn't stop until they're at his side.

With a rush of relief, Oliver pulls both of them into a tight embrace. Felicity whimpers his name, clinging to him, Ellie squished between them. It's not long enough, not nearly, but they don't have time for that, not right now. Still, Oliver presses a quick series of kisses to the top of Felicity's head before doing the same to Ellie. His hands skim over them, a cursory glance. But it's the other Oliver who utters a barely audible, "Is she…?" in reference to the scratches on Ellie's arms, but Felicity shakes her head, whispering, "She's okay, she's okay."

He breathes out a tremendous sigh of relief. His fingers twitch like he's fighting the urge to just reach out and take his daughter, but he doesn't. He won't do that to Felicity. Oliver fully understands the compulsion his future self is fighting against.

"And you?" her future husband asks roughly. "You're okay?"

"Yes," she murmurs against Ellie's temple, nodding hard as she strokes her shaking fingers through the little girl's curls again.

"*Good*." It's gritty and heavy, full of meaning. It doesn't matter that this isn't *his* Felicity; the older Oliver doesn't let something like that impact her importance to him and it's obvious.

Oliver wants to ask more, to follow up on his future self's questions and make sure they're really, truly okay, but it has to be enough that they're here, *alive*.

So he just nods and holds them tighter - more protective than affectionate - before turning back to the fight. He's more than ready to jump in if it looks like Ellie wants or needs help… but she doesn't.

"It's her," Felicity whispers in awe, watching the fight unfold. Her voice shakes. "It's Ellie."

"Yeah," is all he can manage.

His eyes dart to his older self. He's equally hesitant to make a move, although the yearning to do just that is evident in the way he hovers. Neither of them want to be a hindrance, and an unknown element can complicate things, even when it's well-meaning. He glances over at Oliver instead, and closes the distance between them until the two of them bracket Felicity and Ellie.

Zoom blocks a blow from Ellie's fist, twisting his arm to yank her to him. He leans in dangerously close as he snarls, "Slowed or not, you were raised a fool to think you can best me, girl."

"I was raised to save myself," Ellie snaps. "There's nothing foolish about that." She breaks his hold on her, managing to punch him solidly in the jaw before he grabs her again, stilling her movements. It's clear that Zoom is more than aware of the danger Ellie represents when she's in motion. Ellie doesn't seem the least bit bothered by it. She smiles at him as she says, "And you will *always* lose to me. And you *know* it. It's why you're here, isn't it? Why you're trying to kill me when I'm only four years old, like the coward that you are?"

He hisses in distaste and aggravation, pushing off of her without countering her words, something that earns a satisfied smirk from Ellie.

They circle each other, like wild animals, each looking for an opening, a weak spot. A pattern slowly emerges as they move - Zoom wants the tech on Ellie's arm, and she's very aware of it. It's a vulnerability for both of them - the source of Ellie's power over Zoom's speed, and his fixation on beating her.

Zoom reaches for it, but she's already moving to attack, slamming it into his head repeatedly. It's a blur of motion, but not like before. This time it's just pure human speed driving them; there's nothing superhuman about their moves, but it's still a lot to take in.

They parry and pivot and clash in a violent dance that has Oliver simultaneously wanting to jump in and join her as much as hold onto Felicity and his toddler even tighter.

It finally culminates in Ellie lashing out with a whip-like piece of metal that unwinds from the tech. He doesn't even see her unleashing it until she hurls it at Zoom and, like the piece of metal has a life all its own, it wraps around Zoom's neck, fuses itself to his suit, instantly tightening.

"No!" Zoom screams, tearing at it with his clawed fingers.

"Gotcha!" Ellie shouts, pulling him closer as she goes to press a button on her arm… but he does the same. His hand snatches out and presses a series of buttons, the same ones she'd pressed when she'd first arrived. She gasps, clamping her hand around his shove him away, but it's too late.

It's like the room *sighs* around them and the bubble she'd thrown suddenly collapses in on itself.

"No!" Ellie shouts, punching at the buttons to relaunch it, but she's not fast enough, not to keep up with him. She grits her teeth, growling something unintelligible before she reaches for Zoom, ready to grab him…

But he's already gone.

The tachyon detector alarm slices through the air again, the world splitting open like a jagged wound. He disappears into it, and it closes just as quickly.

"No!" Ellie yells, waving her hands over the space, like it might still be there for her to follow him, but there's nothing left. She pushes another series of buttons, and for a second, it looks like the tear might re-open, but then it sputters out. She throws her hands in the air with a livid, "Damn it!"

Her frustration is palpable and for a split second she looks very much like the little girl who'd stomped her foot before trudging out of Thea's room just the night before. She can't be much younger than him right now, but that doesn't make Oliver feel any less like her father. He wants to pull her into his arms - to say thank you, but also to promise her that it will all be okay, because he will never let it *not* be.

"That's a naughty word," a muffled voice comes from the little face that's pressed against his chest. "Isn't it, Momma?"

Oliver can't help a disbelieving chuckle as he pulls back to look down at her. She's still snug in her mother's arms, looking up at Felicity with wide, curious eyes. Her face is remarkably impassive considering everything that'd just happened.

The older version of her turns towards the small voice, her face instantly changing, like she's just now remembering that they're there. When she spies her four-year-old self, the frustration melts away, a small smile taking its place.

"You're right," she tells herself. "Thank you for reminding me."

"You're welcome," his little Ellie-bug replies, with almost painful amounts of sincerity.

"How are you…?" his older self starts. He shakes his head, taking a step towards her, his face full of wonder. "How is this even possible?"

The adult Ellie's smile grows as she smiles up at her father. "Because of this." She tilts her head towards her younger self. "Because of her. From the time I was four, you and mom and the rest of the team devoted all your resources to beating Zoom."

"Are you like me?" Barry asks. His voice is raw, almost broken, and he's still holding his throat, but he's at least standing.

"No," Ellie says, shaking her head. "I'm no metahuman. Plain ol' human here."

The answer is so remarkably like Felicity that Oliver almost forgets how to breathe.

"Metahuman?" Felicity asks.

Ellie's eyes switch to her mother, and a whole new level of softness colors her face. "Yeah. Like… enhanced humans. It's a whole thing. We call them metahumans, eventually. But I'm not one of them. I'm just me." She lifts her left arm, indicating the tech running along her sleeve. "But I do have a bit of cutting edge technology helping me along." She pulls up her sleeve, showing a series of circuitry imbedded in her skin that disappears up her arm. "It obviously needs some fine-tuning since that just happened, but still. It does the job."

"But why you?" Oliver asks. Ellie just lifts an eyebrow in question, and both Felicity and Oliver react - it's like looking into a mirror. She looks *just* like him. "I mean, why is it you that came back? Why not me?"

Why is he risking his daughter's life to chase Zoom through time?

Ellie grins at that, shaking her head a bit, like this is a conversation they've already had. And they probably did, Oliver realizes.

"Because you don't have a month's worth of tachyons built up in your body to power it, Dad," she replies. "This technology was built for me. No one else can use it. And no one else does."

"What does that mean?" Felicity asks.

"It means I'm the one who came back because I've always been the only one to come back," Ellie says. "Other than Barry, obviously. I should say the only full-on human who can come back. At least for now."

"So you…" Felicity starts. She glances down at the confused little girl in her arms before looking back at her. "Do you remember all of this?"

A beautiful grin lights up her face, one full of nostalgia as she says, "Right down to the fairy castle and the strawberry waffles."

"Oh my God," Felicity whispers, her voice choking with tears. "Wow."

"Yeah," Ellie agrees.

"Wow," Felicity repeats, nodding with watery eyes. "That's…" The words fade, leaving her with nothing but a look of bittersweet happiness as she smiles at the adult Ellie. When the little Ellie in her arms moves, somehow aware that she's now part of the conversation, Felicity squeezes her eyes shut and presses her lips to the top of her head.

The words hit Oliver *hard*. They are on the verge of losing her, but knowing that she remembers this, that she takes it with her as she grows and lives her life…

It means more than he could have ever expected it would.

"Where did Zoom go?" Barry asks, his voice stronger now. "Why didn't you go after him?"

Oliver almost has the state of mind to whack him on the back of his head because he doesn't like the insinuation in his voice, but Ellie just huffs out in annoyance, clearly just as frustrated as Barry is.

"I tried," she replies. "He locked me out. He has this space, this… lair of his own. It's hard to describe, but there's something he does that locks me out so I can't follow him there. It's not a time, it's more of a pocket. I guess. It's sort of like his version of the Arrow Cave."

"We don't call it that," Oliver immediately says. He doesn't miss the way his older self stifles a laugh.

"I'm pretty sure the fact that she does call it that means we do,"

Felicity points out.

He grudgingly has to admit she has a point.

"But if you remember this," Barry interrupts, "you had to have known you wouldn't beat him."

Ellie bites her lower lip in a move that's so *Felicity* that it's startling. "I thought that maybe this time it'd be different. Maybe because I knew how it went down that I could change it. That maybe it wasn't such a big change that the speed force wouldn't throw a hissy fit. I was wrong." She shrugs. "I eventually beat him. I know that. *He* knows that." She grits her teeth, keeping herself from uttering something not suitable for young ears. Her entire demeanor changes, her eyes losing focus, seeing something from her time. "I want it over, just as much as you guys do. If you knew how much danger he's had us in, how close we came to losing so much because of him, how Nate…"

She cuts herself off, her jaw snapping shut. She clearly doesn't want to reveal too much, but she still gives something away when she reaches up to touch the rough scar that runs along the side of her neck.

The move sends a chill down Oliver's spine, and he can't imagine what the allusion to his newborn son does to his older self.

"How Nate *what*?" the future Oliver asks, his voice dangerously low.

It's a tone that's made grown men drop to their knees and beg for mercy, but Ellie barely bats an eyelash at it.

She holds her hands up in placating manner as she says, "I *love* my life, Dad." There's so much certainty and passion in her voice that it halts the older Oliver in his tracks. "I won't risk damaging my own timeline more by saying too much. I can't, I'm sorry. But I swear to you that Nate will be fine. That I'm fine. We have lives we love, lives worth fighting for."

It's not enough for the older Oliver, but he can't argue that logic.

Ellie smiles, seeing the same thing. "I promise, Dad."

"And us?" Felicity asks, the words coming out in the smallest voice he's ever heard from her. Her hand trembles as she strokes little Ellie's hair. "What about our timeline?"

Oliver's not sure what he's expecting, but the way his grown

daughter's face contorts with a weird sense of longing has his heart dropping. Felicity sees it, too, and she shakes her head, already knowing where this is going.

"Your timeline will be safe from Zoom," Ellie tells them. "When I leave, I'll seal the breach, so you won't ever have to worry about him taking me. *Your* version of me. He won't be able to get through again."

No one will.

The words go unspoken, but they all hear it.

Oliver's chest tightens as Felicity's face crumbles. She cradles Ellie closer, opening her mouth to speak, but the adult Ellie cuts her off.

"It's for the best," she says. "He is far too dangerous. The risk is too high. And you have the chance to raise your children, *your* Ellie, without the threat of him hanging over you."

Their Ellie.

Looking at the little girl in Felicity's arms, it's hard to think she's not theirs. She's the only Ellie they've ever known, and he loves this little girl more fiercely than he could possibly have imagined just a month ago. But maybe there's more truth to the story they told the press than he'd thought at the time. As much as they have loved this Ellie as their own, as much as she treated them like her parents… in some ways, they never really were.

It doesn't make it hurt any less, and it doesn't quell the ridiculous urge to hold her and never let her go. Because she *is* his daughter. She's from a different time, a different place, but that doesn't change the fact that there is some part of him in there, in some way.

Oliver covers Felicity's hand where she's holding the back of Ellie's head, holding her close. Felicity looks up at him, her eyes filling with more tears, and he can see the want there… and the knowledge that it can't be fulfilled.

He just stares at her, sharing her pain, her grief, trying to offer her the strength they both need.

"And our timeline?" the older Oliver asks. His eyes linger on Felicity's crestfallen face before looking back at the adult Ellie. "What happens there?"

"Who do you think's been sending technology back to you?" Ellie asks with a wry smile. "Sara Lance was *not* the one building it. It's what was always done. It's what we'll keep doing. The barriers that are up need maintenance. We can't make it as permanent as we can when it's different realities."

Her explanation is so far over Oliver's head that he can't even hope to grasp it, but he doesn't get the chance to even try as the tachyon detector goes off *again*. A bolt of fear has him grabbing Felicity and Ellie, crowding them together in his arms, but when he sees the adult Ellie's reaction - a slight roll of her eyes and an unbothered sigh - he pauses.

Ellie steps aside, looking almost bored as she watches the space she'd just been occupying.

Time splits again, and someone skids through. It's a man all in red, the suit remarkably similar to the one Barry had been wearing when he'd first dropped Ellie off, except this time the mask is off and…

And this Barry has a head of entirely grey hair.

Oliver's jaw drops at the sight of the old man.

"Uncle Barry looks funny," little Ellie whispers.

He absolutely does. He's still lanky and there's still a strange perpetual youth to him that lets him keep the hopeful, doe-eyed look he'd obviously perfected long ago. It's really the grey that is a stark contrast, and he can't help the laugh that slips out at the sight.

"Hey," the younger Barry says, almost sounding offended, "I still have hair!"

The older Barry shoots his younger self a tired look, which makes the him deflate a little. He doesn't even bother responding before turning to Ellie, whose mouth is already open to say something, but he cuts her off, "They're out of time, Ellie. You should have waited for me."

Out of time?

"If I had waited, Barry," Ellie replies, "my grandmother would have died."

"Ellie…" The older Barry's face softens. "She was supposed to."

The entire room goes still at that. Oliver's eyes shoot to his mother, who's staring at the entire proceeding with a shocked look. She blinks at that revelation before meeting his gaze. The fact that he might never have gotten the chance to do this again is *chilling*. That the last thing they'd discussed was her hiding something *huge* from him, lying to him *again*… knowing that he wouldn't have gotten peace from that, much like his older self hadn't. It doesn't change or fix anything, but it doesn't lessen the grateful relief that flies through the air between them.

His mother is alive in spite of time's will - in spite of *fate* - and entirely thanks to the daughter who has yet to even be conceived in this timeline.

"She's my family, Barry," Ellie says, her voice hardening. "I never got to know her in our reality. I wasn't about to just stand by and let her die. And besides, I didn't last time," she points out, poking him in the shoulder. "Wouldn't messing with that now be a bigger risk?"

There's no denying that, and both Barrys sigh in tacit agreement.

"It's too late to debate it now anyway," the older man says. "It's done. Now…" He turns, his eyes finding the little Ellie. "We need to get your younger self home and seal this breach off. They're running out of time."

"What do you mean 'out of time'?" Felicity asks, her voice taking on a slightly hysterical level of worry, but the only response she gets is the adult Ellie casting a look towards her younger self. It only makes Felicity hold her even tighter, with a quiet desperation that Oliver feels in the very roots of his soul.

"I know," Ellie whispers, and none of them miss the sadness in the words. "I remember."

Felicity lets out a broken sob, shaking her head. She looks at him before looking at his older self. "But… but we…"

There's nothing left to say though, and they both know it.

Oliver's already moving. He winds his arms around her and little Ellie, holding both of them in an anxious effort to hold onto this last moment for as long as possible.

"I love you," Felicity murmurs, pressing her face into Ellie's hair. Oliver curls around them, catching a hint of her shampoo. He'll never

forget it, just like he'll never forget this moment. "I love you, Ellie. I love you, always. In any universe. In every universe." Felicity's next sob is less controlled as she pulls back just enough to look down at Ellie. "Be amazing, Ellie-bug, because you amaze me. You have from the instant I met you."

Oliver can't speak. He can only watch as Ellie blinks up at her mother before turning her confused eyes to him. He meets her gaze, smiling. The move has a tear falling from his eye, and it only makes her frown more. He nods, brushing his hand down the side of her face. He lets his fingers linger on her cheek, her soft perfect little cheek.

"What's happening?" Ellie asks.

There's a note of fear in her voice, and that immediately has them changing course. They can't have her scared, they can't do that to her. It's not fair. Even if their hearts breaking, she can't know that.

"You're gonna go see Nate," Oliver tells her. He forces a smile as his voice thickens. He runs his fingers through her hair one more time. "And have your old room back. And play with Little Sara again. And you're going to make your mommy so, *so* happy, baby, when she sees you."

Ellie perks up at that, excitement working its way through her little body as she asks, "I am?"

"You are," Felicity confirms. Her voice cracks on the last word, and she chokes out a desperate sob, tears falling down her cheeks against her will. Oliver soothes a hand up and down her back in an attempt to comfort her, biting the tip of his tongue to keep his own sobs at bay. Felicity nods emphatically. "You get to see Nate and Little Sara and it's going to be great."

"Then why are you sad?" Ellie asks, her voice growing small.

"It's…" Words fail him. There's no easy way to answer that, and after a second, he doesn't even bother trying. "It's complicated, sweetheart. But we're happy for you. I promise."

Felicity bites her lip and nods, giving Ellie a smile.

"We *love you*, Ellie-bug," Oliver says, his voice finally losing coherency. He leans down, kissing her forehead. "So, so much."

When the older Oliver approaches them, Felicity inhales sharply, her

arms tightening around their daughter. She presses desperate kisses against Ellie's cheeks, and she only stops when Oliver's hand brushes against the side of her face.

Felicity's hand shoots up, gripping his with painful fierceness as she whispers, "Oliver…"

Oliver doesn't know what to say. He just looks into her eyes helplessly.

The future Oliver steps closer, drawing their attention. His eyes are sad and red-rimmed. When he doesn't reach for his daughter immediately, Oliver almost collapses with relief. Just a few more minutes, that's all they need…

The sadness melts into a solemn look when he looks to his younger self.

"Don't go to Nanda Parbat," he says.

Barry says, "Oliver," in the background, but his older self ignores him.

"Don't make any deals with Ra's al Ghul. Kill Damien Darhk on sight. Trust Curtis Holt with your life. Listen to your gut when you meet Harrison Wells. Tell the doctors Laurel is going to develop a blood clot that kills her." The intensity in eyes his suddenly doubles, the vehemence in his voice echoing through the room. "And love this woman in your arms right now like she's the best of you, because she is."

All Oliver can manage is a nod. He hears the words, he knows he'll remember them later because every single second of this moment will be seared into his mind until his final day, but it's the last part that strikes home.

Especially when the older man reaches for Ellie with a barely audible, "C'mere, baby."

Felicity makes a mournful noise that Oliver feels to the very core of his being. He can't believe they're giving her up, that they won't have a cocoon tonight, her little limbs jabbing him in the back… that they won't have her in the morning, begging for strawberry waffles as she simultaneously snuggles herself against him in bed.

God, he doesn't want to think about it. He can't. Because right now, he needs to let her go… and if he keeps thinking about what happens next, he won't be able to. And he has to. They have to.

"Ellie," Felicity whispers as his older self takes his daughter. She keeps her hand on Ellie's face as the future Oliver shifts the little girl in his arms. Ellie's confused. She's *so* confused and Felicity can't contain herself at all as an anguished sob falls from her lips.

"Why's Momma crying?" Ellie asks. "I don't understand."

"She'll cry when you get back home, too, Ellie-bug," the man holding her replies, and for the first time since he's arrived, Oliver catches the tears in his voice. He blinks them away as he smiles at his daughter. "And I'm not sure she'll ever let you go. Your mommy loves you very much."

Ellie nods, looking back to Felicity. "It's okay, Momma. We'll cuddle when I get home."

"Oh God," Felicity gasps, and it's only Oliver's arms around her waist that keeps her standing.

"I love you, Ellie-bug," Oliver tells the little girl.

"I love you, too, Daddy," Ellie replies, giving him a happy smile.

Oliver has to tighten his grip on Felicity to keep himself from falling.

"Here." The adult Ellie steps up. "You're gonna need this." She hands the little girl her stuffed elephant and a nearby pair of photos. One is of the three of them and one is with both of her grandmothers. It's all Oliver can do to keep himself quiet as the older Ellie takes extra care to make sure the little girl has a firm grasp on them and that they're tucked in safe against her chest. "Trust me on that one, kiddo."

The little girl just nods. She's obviously a little unclear on who this woman is, but she holds onto the pictures, pushing her face into her elephant. And then she looks up at the man holding her… at her father. "Can we go see Nate now, Daddy?"

"In a minute, baby," he replies. He looks back at his younger self once more. "Give her space when she wants it," he advises with the same intensity as before. "But don't let her run. Promise me that."

"I promise," Oliver says, with just as much intensity, tightening his hold on the broken woman in his arms. And he means it, because he needs her just as much as she needs him.

"Thank you," the older man whispers to them. "For everything."

And with that, the younger Barry takes hold of the older Oliver's arm and, in the blink of an eye, he, Ellie, and Ellie's Oliver all disappear into the future.

"Oh God," Felicity sobs the second they're out of sight. She lurches forward, her hand reaching out, like she can follow them, but they're gone. Ellie's gone. His own sob echoes hers as he holds her back, wrapping her up in his arms tightly. Felicity falls back against him, a mess of tears and devastation that he feels every bit as keenly. "Oh my God, *Ellie*… She's gone, my baby's gone. I can't… Oliver, she's…"

"Shh," he whispers, every bit of his attention focused on holding her up. "We're okay, honey. We're okay. Ellie's okay…" Oliver chokes on that, his voice halting completely. His daughter's gone. His baby is gone and it doesn't… it doesn't feel real. His voice fades into a muted sob as he says, "She's okay. It's alright."

They cling to each other, the only thing they can do right now.

It takes them several minutes to remember that they're not alone, and that reminder comes in the form of their adult daughter herself.

"I'm sorry," Ellie says. She touches Felicity's shoulder, and they both look at her. Her face is somber, her eyes red with unshed tears. She bites her lip, and the striking resemblance to Felicity hits Oliver all over again before she says, "I didn't understand then. I knew it was hard, but I didn't understand why. Not for a long time."

"Can you…" Felicity meets the young woman's eyes, a pained desperation living in them. "Tell me? Please. Please tell me what happens to her, to my little girl. *Please*."

"She's fine, Mom," Ellie promises, brushing Felicity's hair from her face. "Right now she's running upstairs to meet Nate. He's tinier than she imagined." She glances at Oliver with a smile as she says, "You can't keep up with her, she's so excited." That has Oliver huffing out an unsteady chuckle before she looks back to her mother. "And she doesn't understand at all why you're crying the minute you see her, or why you don't let her go for hours. She's very happy. And healthy. And *so* loved. And part of that is because of *you*. She will keep those photos…"

Ellie pauses, unzipping her jacket just enough to reach inside. She's wearing a tanktop underneath it, revealing a large scar that seems to wind around her collarbone. Oliver doesn't get the chance to comment on it, though, because she's pulling something out of her jacket.

The photos. She's holding the very photos she'd just given to her younger self, only now clearly aged. They're wrinkled - one more than the other, water spilling on it at some point - and the edges are worn, like she looks at them often. Ellie holds them up with a smile, her fingers fitting into natural grooves at the bottom. She doesn't just keep them. She *cherishes* them.

"She keeps these, and that elephant, for her whole life." Ellie glances at the pictures, looking quietly serene, before looking back to them. "And she will love you. *Always*."

It's meant to soothe them, but it does nothing of the sort. Ellie carefully places the photos back inside her jacket, and Oliver can't help but feel like he's losing her all over again the second they disappear. It's just a reminder of what they lost. Their daughter left just a few minutes ago, but they know it's forever… and they both miss her with a physical ache that feels like it might never fade.

"I need her," Felicity says with a quiet rush of air. "I need my baby. Please… *please* don't seal the breach. I don't care about Zoom. We'll deal with him, the same way that you are. We'll figure it out. We will. I just… I need to know she can come back. That *you* can come back."

"Oh, Mom," Ellie whispers.

She steps up, wrapping her arms around both of them. Felicity lets go of Oliver, holding her adult daughter with everything she has as Oliver winds his arms around both of them. It's different, but at the same time it's not. Because she's still Ellie. He feels it in his bones.

"I'm so sorry," his daughter says. "I love you both. I've always loved you. Every version of you."

"So you'll leave it open?" Felicity asks, pulling back just enough to look Ellie in the eye.

Ellie hesitates. Her eyes dance over Felicity's face, taking her in before sighing. "Your Ellie deserves better than that," she finally says. "And so does her big sister. You have an amazing chance to glimpse a possible future, to know different pitfalls that might stand in your way, but still make your lives your own. I want that for you. But to have that, you have to let me seal the breach." She gives them a sad smile. "You have to let me go."

Another ragged sob sounds through the kitchen, but this time it's Oliver's. Tears blur his vision as he cups Ellie's face, rubbing his thumb

over her cheek.

"Ellie," he whispers. "Baby, we don't know how do that."

It's the most honest he can ever remember being.

"Moment by moment," she replies. A tear slips from her eye, and Oliver catches it with his thumb. Ellie chokes out a little laugh. "It's as easy and as hard as that."

With another smile, she forces herself to step back. Felicity lets out an anguished moan, instantly turning into Oliver's arms. They wrap themselves around each other, both of them watching as their daughter turns to Moira.

A blatantly affectionate smile covers her face. "Grandma…" she says. "Thank you for being part of my life."

"Thank you for saving mine," Moira replies.

"I miss you," Ellie tells hers. "I miss our talks about fairies and all the chocolates you snuck me."

Moira hushes her softly with a dull blush as she looks at her son. "That's what a grandmother does, Ellie."

"I know," Ellie says. "But I don't have you back home and I have always felt your absence. I am so grateful to have known you here."

Oliver watches his mother purse her lips, tears welling her eyes as she takes Ellie's hands in hers. "I am as well, my little Ellie-bug."

Moira squeezes tightly once, and then she lets go, stepping back.

"Don't go," Felicity implores. "Stay a bit. Tell us about her. About *you*."

For a second, Oliver thinks she might. But then Ellie looks at Barry, who's been standing quietly in the background, and then she shakes her head. "I have my own time to get back to, Mom. My own family. And you're a part of that." She looks at both of them. "You both will always be a part of that. But you need to heal, and you can't do that with me here. I have to go."

"No," Felicity insists, taking a step towards her. "*No*. Please. I…"

"Honey," Oliver manages, his voice breaking. "Felicity, we have to. We have to let her go. You know we do."

For the rest of his life, he'll remember the look she gives him, the sheer pain that haunts her eyes and pierces his soul. He feels it every bit as much as she does, and it *guts* him. But Ellie's a grown woman, maybe with a family all her own, one that needs her…

They can't keep her here.

Ellie steps back next to her Barry.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Not even close," Ellie replies. She gives him a sad smile before looking back at Felicity, her face crumpling slightly.

For the first time, it occurs to Oliver how much this is costing her, too.

"We'll be okay, Ellie-bug," he promises. He clears his throat, smiling at her. "We will. Take care of yourself."

"I will," Ellie says. And then she smiles again, and this one is just for him. "No more Sad Eyes, Daddy. I want more than that for both of you."

Without another word, Barry grips her arm. With one last little wave at them, Ellie looks back at Barry…

And then they're gone.

The only remnant left is a red searing slice of time spreading outward before it dissipates, the breach healing in its entirety behind them.

There's no power in any world that could keep Felicity standing. He doubts there's one that could steady him, either. They fall to the floor together, him cushioning her collapse to the solid stone floor as sorrow overwhelms them both. They hold onto each other, their ports in the storm, her fingers clutching at his shirt so tightly he thinks it might tear as he grips her so hard she might bruise.

But neither of them care as they hold each other, mourning their loss.

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

> We want to ask you all to trust us. Grief is a horrible thing, but necessary in a situation like this. We needed this chapter to get to the next one... I suspect you'll all like us a whole lot more next Monday than this one. Tissues aplenty are needed this week, guys, and we strongly advise against reading in public. Thanks for sticking with us as we pass the 400k mark!

In the haze that follows Ellie's departure, he sees her.

Oliver drifts about in a dreamlike in-between place. He's not asleep, not really, but he's surely not conscious either. She's fresh enough in his mind's eye that he catches wisps of her blonde curls on the edges of his vision and hears peels of her laughter ring out in his ears.

That first little "*Hi, Daddy*" - the first instant he'd ever heard her voice - is on repeat in his mind.

Reality blurs; it feels indistinct, and ill-formed. Maybe he dreams or maybe it's just fantasies playing out, a balm for his conscious mind, but all his hopes - all those quiet plans that'd never quite come to fruition - flit through his imagination. And, God, but he can *see* it so clearly… Walking around a lake with Felicity, swinging Ellie between them, eliciting delighted giggles; giving his little girl a haircut, somehow winding up with one side longer than the other; getting a pet, thinking it would be their family's, but it's only hers, only Ellie's.

It all feels as real as if it had actually happened. And each and every single one is a knife sinking deeper and deeper into his chest.

They're wishes. Wants. Longings.

Regrets.

They plague him, filling his senses, overriding everything until all that's left is the soft echo in his ear…

"*Hi, Daddy."*

It rings out over and over again.

As much as that guts him - as much as it feels more like torture than

anything else that's ever happened to him - he hopes with everything he has that it never fades, that he never forgets the sound of her voice. Because that would be worse, to forget the trust and love for him that was so very evident from that first word she ever spoke to him.

He has no idea how he'd deal with that.

"Oliver."

It's a whisper. He knows it's that, because he knows his mother's voice as well as he knows his own, but it still booms inside his ears. It's a thundering sound of reality encroaching on the imaginary little slice of perfection dancing just outside his reach. No, he's not ready to leave it, not yet.

"Oliver."

Some rational part of him is aware that she isn't as loud as she seems right then, but he still flinches as if she were screaming in his ear.

"Oliver, sweetheart…"

He could ignore it, could stay where he is, in the in-between, where nothing is quite real, where everything is safe. Where it's *okay*. A world like that isn't tangible, but it feels real enough that he doesn't want to leave it.

Felicity won't.

"*Come on, honey… come on."*

"*No, no… no, I can't leave, I can't leave here. What if she comes back, what if…?"*

"*Felicity… she's not coming back."*

"*But… I know that. I know that, but you don't… we don't* know *that, and… what if? What if she does? What if… what if something goes wrong, and they need to get back through? They came through once - she came through. What if she does again, and I'm not here? What if she needs me and I'm not here?"*

Oh God.

Her hysteria and desperation rings out even minutes - or is it hours? - later. Bile crawls up his throat. It's the other side of the coin to the resonating sound of Ellie's laughter. He wants to stay there, in that

special place, where everything's *okay*…

Someone shakes his shoulder gently, barely touching him, but the second the hand makes contact with him, it's like being slammed back into his body at bone-crushing speed.

The world where everything is okay disappears in an instant and Oliver wants to *scream*.

"Oliver."

With a gasp, his eyes shift into a hyper-alertness, taking his surroundings in all at once. He instantly regrets it. The shadows in the kitchen have changed, growing deeper, signaling it's much later in the day. But sunlight is still there. The rays are warm, a bright dusky orange that pierces right through his head, blinding him with its harshness. His eyelids are dry and itchy, lined with lead-coated sandpaper that somehow feels worse when his eyes start watering.

At first glance, it all looks the same, despite the time that's passed.

Nothing's changed.

Except everything has.

A dull throbbing pain radiates through his skull, emphasizing the weight sitting in his chest, the one that's been slowly crushing his lungs for hours now.

Despite the fact that she's the one who jarred him into reality, he doesn't see his mother where she hovers next to him, her eyes pinched with sadness. He doesn't quite register Diggle either, standing a few feet away. Oliver doesn't see that his eyes are bloodshot, his face drawn with sympathy… and pity. He doesn't hear his mom saying his name again, or the distant chatter of a television on. He isn't aware of any of the sounds of life going on around them as if everything hasn't just been taken away, as if he hasn't been gutted so thoroughly it's a miracle he's functioning at all right now. He doesn't feel his legs or his arms, or the cold press of the stone floor where he still sits.

The only thing he feels - the only thing he's aware of - is the warm press of Felicity's body in his lap.

With a little jerk, Oliver looks down, rasping, "Felicity?" She's asleep against him - more like she's cried herself into exhaustion, for it's surely not a peaceful, restful sleep - her body limp and unresponsive.

She's pallid, her skin red and blotchy, the circles under eyes dark and uneven. For an instant, he questions if she's even breathing, and a surge of panic shoots through him so hard and fast that he sits up taller, a harried, "*Felicity*?" coming out before he sees her chest moving.

Oliver doesn't hear Moira's, "She's okay, she's alright," nor does he pay attention to the fact that his body is moving at a painfully glacial pace, every bit of his energy having been geared towards the woman he loves, towards making sure she's okay. There aren't any reserves left for him, not that he cares. Not that he'll ever care. As long as she's alright, he'll make do.

Like right now.

His hands feel like wooden blocks as he pulls her closer, one coming up to her cheek, cupping it gently. It's no longer wet from tears, and even though his fingers feel numb, he can tell the skin is painfully swollen from hours of crying. Of mourning. Of trying to cope with the fact that…

Ellie's gone.

It all rushes back with a vengeance.

For a split second, he'd been stuck in that limbo, where some part of him *knew* that things were different, but he didn't remember *how*. But now… now he's remembering her beautiful little face, her voice, her giggle, her smile, her eyes. The way she'd looked at him with confusion and concern, not understanding what was happening, but knowing it was big.

How she'd tried to make it better.

"*It's okay, Momma. We'll cuddle when I get home."*

But she couldn't. She *can't*. Not with them. Because she's gone. That Ellie… she's gone forever and she's not coming back.

It should make him feel better that he knows she's alive somewhere else, that she's going to flourish and grow into the most beautiful, strong and *powerful* woman he's ever met besides her mother, but it doesn't. Because she's not *here*. And because she never will be again.

Oliver's face crumples. Tears flood his eyes, burning the tender tissue, making him wince. Everything feels so raw… But it's nothing

compared to the anguish pulling him under.

She's gone. His little girl is gone and nothing is okay.

He forces himself to take a breath, but it's useless. Every breath he takes is sucked into the black hole living in his chest, suffocating him. It's only getting worse with each passing moment. How is he going to survive this? He knows she's alive, that she's well somewhere, but that doesn't change the fact that he lost her - that *they* lost her.

"Oh my sweet boy," Moira whispers, her voice cracking under the strain of emotion.

Oliver vaguely feels her hand running over his head as he falls against Felicity. It's soothing, grounding him enough to finally look up at her. The older woman's face is completely scrubbed of makeup, her hair pulled back. Her eyes are puffy, and the solidarity he sees there only makes the grief worse. She's feeling Ellie's absence on a different level, but she still feels it. Ellie had touched so many lives while she was here, changed so much, made so many things different - *better* - and all of that makes the loss of her so much more acute.

Tears fill his mother's eyes when he meets her gaze and she purses her lips to keep them from falling. Instead, she cups his face, leaning forward to kiss his forehead like he'd done to Ellie a hundred times… Like a *parent*. Maybe it's a self-preservation thing, he's not sure, but he's overly aware of how soft her hands are, of how warm she is, and that she smells like home. She's safety and comfort and he wants nothing more than to fall into her arms, to ask her to help make it better.

But she can't.

Nothing can.

"Mom," Oliver whispers. He leans into her, closing his eyes. Tears slip down his cheeks. He wants to wipe them away, but that would mean letting go of Felicity, and he's not doing that. He's never letting her go, not as long as she needs him.

And she does. She so desperately does, if the last few hours are any indication.

It'd taken them a long, long time to stop crying the first time.

He doesn't remember much. He knows they stayed on the ground -

right where they still are - and that he stared at the floor for a while, his brain working overtime to make sure he'd memorized every detail that he could. He hadn't really felt it then, he realizes, not like he's starting to now. He'd even fooled himself into believing the stuff he kept whispering to Felicity - about where Ellie was, about what the adult version of her had told them. He'd talked about how beautiful she is as an adult, how amazing and strong, and that it's a beautiful gift that she remembers them, that they have such a lasting impact on her life.

Felicity had been silent, not responding… not until he'd asked her if she wanted to get up.

"*No. No, I'm not moving. Not… I can't. Not yet."*

She said it over and over until everything had completely dissolved. She wasn't moving. She wasn't leaving her daughter. End of story. No amount of logic or explanation or begging could get through to her. She'd ignored Moira completely, snapped at Donna the second she'd arrived, ignored Diggle, and begged Oliver to not make her end her vigil.

"*Please… please, I can't… I know what I'm saying and I know it's ridiculous - I* know *it, Oliver, okay, I'm not stupid. I know what I'm asking and I know it's impossible, but… but what if? What if she comes back and I'm not here? I can't do that to her, I can't leave her. I can't abandon her. I need to be here, Oliver. I need to be. Please."*

Her desperation had sliced through him, cutting him open from the inside out. She'd known what she was saying, but she just *couldn't leave*. She'd been aware of it, but she couldn't fight the need to make sure. To *be* sure.

And so, with a whispered, "*Okay. Okay, honey, we're not leaving. We'll be here,"* they'd stayed. He could never have left her, and he hadn't been about to force her to go. If she needed him with her on the floor, staring at the place where the breach had healed, then that's where he'd be. And that's where they'd stayed. They hadn't moved, not for hours. She kept whispering the same thing - "*I'm here, I'm here, oh please, Ellie… oh please, come back to me. Please…"* - before breaking down because she *knew* it wasn't possible. They'd been told, explicitly, but Felicity hadn't been swayed.

It was the most vulnerable and exposed he'd ever seen her, and that alone had him holding her tighter, keeping her as close as he could.

He held her when she cried, talked with her when she was open to it, and otherwise simply hugged her, not letting her go. He lost count of the times when he cried with her, pressing his face into her hair, breathing her in…

She smells like Ellie, like their daughter. Or maybe it's the other way around, maybe he associates the scent of Felicity's conditioner or her perfume with Ellie. God, that'd be worse. It makes his chest squeeze so hard he stops breathing.

He isn't sure when they'd finally fallen asleep. Or even if he really did. It doesn't feel like it, but time isn't quite connecting for him otherwise.

Oliver pulls back from his mother, looking around again, taking it all in with fresh eyes. He blinks, staring at the new darkness that's settled over the kitchen.

Felicity doesn't budge, not even when Moira runs a soft hand down the side of her head, smoothing her hair back.

"What time is it?" Oliver asks.

"It's almost eight," Moira replies.

That makes him start. That means they've been there for… since… It hits him that he doesn't know exactly what time Ellie left. He doesn't know the last minute she was here, the last hour… It was lunchtime, he remembers that, because she'd eaten chicken nuggets.

Oliver's eyes fly to the dining room table where she'd left her plate and glass.

They're gone. The table is empty and back in its original place, the chairs tucked underneath it. The table runner is back, a bowl of fruit sitting in the center. Those hadn't been there before, because Felicity had knocked over a glass of juice a few weeks ago, spilling all over the table and everything on it.

He can still hear Ellie's little gasps as she'd said, "*Momma, you made a mess!"*

She's gone.

His breath comes hard and fast as that realization washes over him once more, but he doesn't realize he's on the verge of hyperventilation until Diggle appears at his other side.

"Oliver, man, take it easy," he says softly, gripping his shoulder.

It's an anchor and it slams Oliver back into his body again, out of the past and into the present. It's so abrupt, though, that he goes to the opposite extreme and can't breathe for a second. He squeezes his eyes shut, ducking his head down against Felicity.

Felicity.

She's still asleep.

Oliver pushes everything else away, focusing wholly on her. She needs him. She needs him to be strong for her, because when she wakes up, when she remembers just like he is right now…

"Why don't you take her upstairs," Moira suggests. He almost says no, and he does start to shake his head - she didn't want to leave, so they're not leaving - but his mother stops him. "Oliver, you can't stay here forever. Ellie wouldn't want that. She'd want…"

"Mom, please," Oliver whispers, his voice breaking on half-formed words. The simple sound of his daughter's name is too much. "I can't… hear that. Not right now."

"Okay," she concedes. "I understand. But I still think you should get off the floor. You need to take care of…" *Yourself*. She doesn't finish, though. "Of her. You need to take care of her. She's not going to be… she just…"

She just lost her child.

Oliver lets out a sardonic laugh. He doesn't need to be told that.

"Come on, Oliver," Diggle says. "Let's get you guys upstairs."

"I can't." He shakes his head. "What if…"

"I'll stay," Moira interrupts. Oliver looks up, meeting her gaze. She tries to smile but it falls flat, a dull, lifeless expression that has the opposite of its intended effect. "I'll stay here. You have my word. I know that Felicity was… she wanted to make sure someone was here. I would want to stay here, too." She takes a shaky breath, and the strong facade she wears slips, just enough to let him see just how much this is affecting her as well. She touches Oliver's cheek with trembling fingers, her eyes slipping over to Felicity as she adds, "Just in case."

"You don't have to," he starts, but she cuts him off again, right on the heels of Diggle sighing.

"I'm staying," Moira repeats, her voice a little sharper, leaving no room for argument. And he finds he doesn't *want* to argue, not anymore. "And you're going upstairs. Alright?"

"Okay," Oliver whispers, nodding. He looks down at Felicity. She needs a proper bed. She needs to be taken care of; *he* needs someone to take care of. And he can't do that on the floor of the kitchen. "Okay."

Pulling Felicity closer to his chest, Oliver pulls his legs up towards his chest, ready to push against the kitchen island and use it to stand, but his legs are useless. He can't really feel them and when his boots scrape over the stone floor, it's like watching someone else's limbs move. That doesn't stop him from trying again, though, but he just can't get up.

The logical thing to do would be to set her down, but the very idea has him holding Felicity even tighter.

He can't let go of her. He won't.

"Let me take her," Diggle offers.

"No," he says, shaking his head. He tries again, nearly falling over. His mother lets out a distressed noise as Diggle lurches forward to catch her - to catch both of them - but Oliver snaps himself back up before he drops her. "I've got her." His arms start to shake from the exertion, from trying to do anything after so much has happened. His body is as overtaxed as his heart, and his voice cracks as he repeats, "I've got her."

"Oliver," the older woman whispers, tears evident in her voice as he tries again.

It's like a baby colt trying to stand for the first time. All his energy is gone, despite his stubborn insistence to the contrary. His mother buries her face in her hands, her shoulders falling before she takes a deep breath, filling her frame with the strength that has gotten her through a life filled with hardships that no normal person could ever face.

Moira's voice is sharper as she leans forward again, her hand covering one of his. "Let us help," she says in a near command, just as Diggle

tries another tactic.

"She's not going anywhere, Oliver," he says softly. That has frustration whipping through Oliver's gut, because he knows that - because he won't *let* her - but Diggle isn't done. "It's just for a second. Okay?"

Oliver looks up at his friend… His brother. His face is pinched with sadness and *worry* - for Oliver and for Felicity, for his *family* - as well as a deep well of grief.

He lost Ellie, too.

"Let me help you," the other man says.

A couple of months ago, Diggle wouldn't have bothered saying those simple four words, and they both know it. But nothing's been the same since Ellie arrived, and… and for the first time since Ellie's disappeared, Oliver realizes it's up to *him* to keep the change going.

Ellie got them started - got *him* started - and he needs to keep going, to continue…

To continue the legacy she left behind for them.

As tears blur his vision again, Oliver nods.

Diggle lets out a relieved breath he wasn't aware the man had been holding. "Okay," he says, leaning forward to take Felicity.

Oliver watches his movements as if in a daze, staring at his hands, unsure of how to proceed until Digg whispers, "I've got her." And then Oliver passes her over. His fingers linger as long as they can, until she's out of reach. She isn't waking for anything, and part of Oliver is grateful for that. She needs the rest, more than any of them; she needs all the energy she can get for the baby… but there's also a small, selfish part of him that wants her to wake up, so she can touch him back, reassure him she's okay.

Diggle cradles her against his chest gently, standing in one swift movement.

Oliver's quick to follow. His legs buckle once and he falls against the kitchen island to the sound of his mother gasping his name, but he catches himself. His legs tingle, blood rushing through them; a prickly sensation that feels like his body is trying to work life into dead limbs, but one that's easy to ignore.

"Here," Oliver whispers, reaching for her again. "I've got her, now." Diggle hesitates for a split second, but an instant later he hands her back to him. Oliver hugs her close, shifting her so her head rests against his shoulder. He kisses her forehead, whispering, "I've got you, honey," before turning to head upstairs. He knows Diggle is right behind him, just in case. He's grateful for that, but he barely spares the other man a look as he goes, his awareness so fleeting…

He makes it only one step before he stops. An irresistible pull to *not leave* takes over, to stay right there, in this place… the last place they saw Ellie, the place where she disappeared. An invisible fist tightens around his chest, urging him back. He hadn't felt it earlier - he hadn't let himself - but Felicity had.

Oliver looks back… back at the last spot he'd seen her.

Does she know that she took his heart with him? His and Felicity's both? He hopes not. She doesn't deserve that burden.

"Come on, man," Diggle says, grasping his shoulder, urging him forward. "Let's go."

Before he knows it, he's back at their room, Diggle still at his side. His friend opens the door. When Oliver looks at him, ready to thank him, he sees Diggle's mouth moving… but he can't hear a thing. It's like he's simply mouthing the words. There's no sound. It's not that he can't hear right now, it's just that… there's no sound, nothing his mind can absorb over the dull rush of emptiness that's hollowed him out. There's just… *nothing*.

Expectation crosses Digg's face, his eyebrows going up slightly, clearly waiting for a response.

Oliver simply nods, even though he has no idea what he's agreeing to.

As if he somehow knows that, Diggle clasps Oliver's shoulder again, tightening his grip. Oliver may not be all there right now, but the gesture does more than any words could. He nods, and a stab of pain hits him when he sees the telltale shine of tears in Digg's eyes.

Diggle gives him one last nod and then he turns, heading back towards the stairs, leaving Oliver alone with Felicity.

Their room is dark, dusk settling over the sky outside the picture windows. Still, there are enough rays filtering through to make out what a mess they'd left of the room. He'd told Raisa a while ago that

she didn't have to clean it. He liked the lived-in feeling that had inevitably grown since that first night with Felicity and Ellie. It was home. It *is* home. It still is. It always will be, because this is where the best things in his life had started.

Oliver steps into the room.

The pillow castle that they never tore down is still there, along with piles of clothes forgotten at the foot of the bed. One of Ellie's shoes sits in the middle of the room, and there are toys everywhere. He knows there's more in the pillow castle, because Ellie had made it her unofficial fairy meeting room.

How many nights had he and Felicity sat on the bed, their heads at the foot of the mattress so they were closer, listening to their daughter talking to her fairies in-between their own soft conversations?

This room had been a sanctuary, a place away from the darkness that always seemed to find them.

No, it *is* a sanctuary. He needs to remember that. And he needs to use it that way now.

He keeps moving… until he sees what's on the bed.

Someone had brought up the stuffed elephant that Ellie had picked out for her sister at the hospital, the twin to her own.

Oliver stops dead in his tracks, making Felicity's head roll against his shoulder. His fingers dig into her, tears blurring his vision as he stares at the toy. It sits on the bed, partially hidden by the shadow of a bedpost, its ears and trunk highlighted by the light coming from the hallway.

"*Look, Daddy, look! I got Ellies! One for me and one for my sister, 'cause they're sisters, too! Isn't that cool?"*

Like his mind took a perfect picture of the moment, Oliver sees her running up to him, one stuffed animal tucked under each arm, looking so proud and happy and excited that she found them.

Her voice echoes in his ear…

"*One for me and one for my sister!"*

"Oh Ellie," he chokes out, stumbling the rest of the way to the bed. He

trips over something on the floor, something soft, and when he looks down he sees it's another one of her stuffed animals. Another one catches his eye, half underneath the bed, and there's a doll on the chair and a hairbrush tucked up against the wall. He lets out a little laugh, shaking his head as he whispers, "How did you end up with so much stuff, Ellie-bug?"

It feels unexpectedly good talking to her again. Just saying her name out loud fills him with a warmth that he only felt in her presence. He can hear her nonchalant response as she shrugs - "*I don't know, Daddy, I just have it."*

"They didn't just magically appear out of thin air," he replies, his voice hushed. He honestly doesn't remember her having so many - how had he not noticed them strewn everywhere like they are right now? "I bet your grandmas had something to do with this."

No response. Not that there could be. Not that he was expecting one - realistically, anyhow.

With a sad smile, he says, "I am so glad you have so much stuff, Ellie."

And he is, he really is. Because it means she was *here*. That she was real and she can be again. She can still exist here, in some form. And she will.

Stepping around the toys, Oliver continues to the bed. It's still unmade from that morning. It's his side he places Felicity on, he notes, before hesitating. Would she want to be on her side, and he on his, with a spot reserved for Ellie between them? God, just the thought has him wincing, because he knows they can't do that. They can't live their lives with a space always waiting for Ellie. It's not fair to her - either version - or to them, or to the baby Felicity's carrying now.

Oliver sets Felicity down gently, smoothing frizzy hair from her face. He pulls her glasses off, setting them on the nightstand. "We're gonna be okay," he says.

It's a promise. A vow. Because they will be. He'll make sure of it. Anything else is unthinkable.

The circles under her eyes have somehow grown deeper and darker. She's asleep out of necessity, her body pushing her into it from pure exhaustion, both emotional and physical. She would have stayed up all day and night if her body had let her. Waiting. Hoping. What will she do when she wakes? Will she be placated that his mother is still

downstairs, taking her place, or will she jump out of bed and rush down there again? He's never seen the desperation that he saw in her face, the primal devotion he'd heard in her voice.

Will he stop her if she insists on going back down? Should he?

He honestly doesn't know.

Oliver slips her heels off, setting them on the floor next to one of Ellie's discarded dresses. It looks like she'd changed her mind while getting dressed that morning, something she'd been prone to, especially when she dressed herself. He smiles at the frilly material, his fingers brushing along the edge.

He wonders if she'll keep the dress she'd worn when she left. He wonders if she'd changed into her pajamas after eating dinner. He wonders if the alternate versions of them did an Ellie kiss or if they're doing the cocoon, unwilling to let her go for even a second.

God, he wouldn't be able to let her go, not ever. They'd only had her for a month and the few hours she's been gone have been *unbearable.* Imagining having her for years then losing her for a month…

It's unfathomable.

He's glad she's home. It's where she belongs. And while it does nothing to soothe the soul-deep ache that fills his chest or fill the gaping hole she left behind, he knows it was right.

With a steadying breath, Oliver works on getting Felicity out of her jacket. He wants to get her into more comfortable clothes, but that can come later. Right now she just needs sleep, and so does he.

The moon is high enough in the sky that he catches sight of a ketchup stain on the wrinkled dress, near her hip. It makes him pause. Oliver runs his thumb over it and without a second though, he leans over and kisses the spot softly. Felicity shifts underneath his touch, leaning towards him. He kisses it again before moving to her stomach. The gentle curve is soft and warm as he kisses her there, too.

A tear falls from the corner of his eye, soaking into her dress. A little life is growing in there, a life they created together. A *new* life, one that is all their own… just like their Ellie will be when she arrives.

"I can't wait to meet you," he whispers. Oliver kisses her stomach once more with a, "You are perfect, just like your sister… just like your

mother. I love you all so much."

It's a long moment before he stands again. His back groans in discomfort, but he ignores it, pulling the comforter over Felicity… It suddenly hits him that tonight will be the first night they've slept in the same bed together without Ellie there.

That's sobering.

Oliver's heart drops so hard it makes him nauseous. He jerks up too fast, his chest tightening at the realization. He instinctively looks at the pillow castle, already lurching towards it to check inside, to check on Ellie before remembering she isn't there. His feet falter underneath him.

She's gone.

He knows this. He *has* known it, but it still crashes into him anew. For a quick second, he'd assumed she was in there, safe and sound… but she's not.

Oliver sucks in a quick, hard breath, nearly choking on it as the pain and grief gathers in his chest again. It surges up into his throat as he falls back onto the bed… right onto the stuffed elephant sitting there, as if it too is waiting for Ellie to reappear again. With a gasp, he jumps back to his feet, grabbing it before he can crush it.

It's soft and pliant and the only person he remembers ever holding it is his daughter.

"Oh God…" Oliver crushes the elephant against his chest, burying his face in it as he sinks to the floor. It smells brand new, like it's never been touched before, and that has angry betrayal slicing through him. Because it doesn't smell like her, it doesn't smell like his little girl. And it should. It *should*. "Ellie… oh Ellie-bug… I miss you so much."

He can't do this. He *can't*… not alone.

There's a strange freedom in recognizing that. Not so long ago, he would have tried to, would have shouldered his grief alone and clung to it as he soldiered on. He's well-versed in doing that, has done it for years before Ellie arrived in their lives. And he'd have managed, but he wouldn't have recovered. Not really. He's learned from Ellie. He knows better now, has a better handle on how to manage his own life, how to be a part of something bigger than himself.

If there's one thing she taught him, it's that he doesn't have to be alone. Not like he used to believe. He's had the answer in front of him the entire time. Felicity… it's always been Felicity. He'd tried denying it, ignoring it, pretending it wasn't real, but she was there… she's always been there.

It's amazing how lucky that makes him feel.

"Felicity," Oliver sighs, the words coming out in a dry croak.

He pushes himself up off the floor, moving to climb onto the bed, to wrap himself around her - to make a new spot, one that's just their own - when he hears a noise at the door.

Oliver spins, holding his breath, setting the elephant on the bed behind him as he narrows his eyes at the open doorway. The hall lights are still on, shining warmth into the room where darkness has more than settled as someone steps into the doorway.

"Oh! I'm sorry," Donna whispers. He can tell she's been crying by the sound of her voice. Oliver isn't sure if it makes him feel better that he isn't the only one who lost this amazing little girl or not. "I didn't mean to… I just wanted to check on you and Felicity."

"It's okay," Oliver replies, sniffling. He wipes his face, glancing back at Felicity. She hasn't moved an inch. It's a little concerning, but then he remembers the *hours* they both spent crying and waiting downstairs. She needs to rest. He touches her hip, rubbing his thumb over her stomach before turning towards the door.

"Is she…?"

"She's still asleep," he confirms as he steps out of the room. He half-shuts the door behind him, but not without one last glance at his sleeping love. He leaves it open just a crack, and when he looks at Donna, she's peering through it as well, wringing her hands. "Do you want to…" he asks, stepping back, making room for her.

"Oh no, no," the older woman says, shaking her head. "I don't want to wake her. She needs her rest."

Oliver nods and then he really looks at her. She's not doing any better than he is. "Are you okay?" he asks softly.

"Am *I* okay?" Donna repeats with a sardonic little laugh. She wipes her eyes and it smears more of her mascara. He can tell she's stopped

crying just long enough to reapply makeup. He wonders how many times that's happened. More than once, he's sure. "I should be asking you that, you know," she finishes.

The words come out in a broken mess, her eyes filling with tears. She covers her mouth and Oliver doesn't think twice before he pulls her into a hug. Donna's shoulders shake as she cries against him. He's barely known this woman a month, but it doesn't matter. Not right now. And it won't ever. The foundation for their relationship solidified during that week when Felicity had been unconscious, when it'd been him and her and Ellie.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Oliver. I didn't think about this when I found out about her, I didn't think about what it would be like. It's so unimaginable to lose a child… and I can't decide if it's better or worse because she still exists somewhere without us." She suddenly pulls back, looking up at him. "She does, right? Ellie's still out there? Somewhere?"

All he can manage is a short nod, pressing his lips into a thin line.

"But it's not here," Donna says, shaking her head. "She's not *here*… and I know she doesn't belong here, I get that, but damn it, this isn't *fair*, not to my baby. She's lost so much, so many people. She shouldn't have to lose her daughter, too. It's not *right*."

He wants to agree with her. He *does*. Because for a few bright shining moments, she was his daughter, and she was home… but he can't.

"No, it is," he croaks, giving her a shaky smile. "It is right. She's where she needs to be. I have to believe that, Donna, or else I don't think… I won't be able to do this."

"Oh, honey," Donna sighs. She cups his cheek with a trembling hand and then it's her turn to pull him into a hug. She wraps her arms around his shoulders, tugging him down so she can hug him with everything she has. She grips him tight for emphasis as she says, "You'll be okay. Because you haven't seen the last of her, right?"

His heart jumps into his throat at that before realizing she's talking about *this* timeline's Ellie.

"And my daughter loves you so much," she continues. "*So much*. You'll get through this together. You will. And all the rest of us will be here to help you however we can."

He nods. But when she doesn't pull back, when she just keeps holding him, he feels something inside him crack. With that, he falls into her. It's a mother's embrace, and while she's not his mother - not in the biological sense - there's no denying that she's still family. With an agonized groan, he hugs her tighter, pressing his face into her shoulder. He sniffles, trying to keep his tears at bay, but it's useless. They're falling, soaking into her sweatshirt.

"It's okay," she whispers, stroking his back. "It's going to be okay."

"Yeah," he chokes out, almost believing her…

Until a terrified, "*Oliver?*" echoes from their room.

He's already moving.

Oliver shoves the door open, Donna hot on his heels, eyes flying wildly around the room. Flashbacks of the last time he'd heard that tone in her voice rocket him back to the safe house, back to when Malcolm had attacked. But he's dead, and Zoom is gone - he can't get back here, Ellie promised.

But there isn't any danger.

And Felicity isn't in the bed.

Oliver barely gets her name out before he sees her stumble out of the pillow castle. He doesn't get the chance to comprehend what she's doing before she launches herself into his arms.

"Oh God," she gasps. "I thought…"

"Hey, it's okay, it's okay," he whispers, immediately hauling her closer, nearly picking her up off her feet in his haste to make sure she's okay.

Felicity holds onto him so tightly it hurts, but he barely feels it as she cries.

Nothing else matters in that moment but her.

He doesn't hear Donna asking if Felicity's okay, if she can do anything, if she can get them anything before eventually coming to the conclusion that this is something she can't fix, not right now. At some point she leaves, shutting the door behind her, leaving them alone.

"What happened?" he asks, trying to pull back just enough to look at her, but she doesn't let him go. If anything she holds him tighter with

a startled, "*No*," digging her nails into his neck as if one wrong move and he'll disappear for good. "I'm here, honey, I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Okay? I'm here."

She doesn't respond, like she can't hear him.

"I woke up and… and I couldn't find Ellie," Felicity whispers. The sound of their daughter's name on her lips slices through him as her words start to run together. "I couldn't find her and I was so *scared*. I thought I was dreaming, I thought… I thought it was all a dream. That it hadn't been *real*, because you weren't here and she wasn't here and… and then I remembered. I remembered that our baby is *gone*." Her voice cracks with her sobs. "But then… then you weren't here either, and I didn't know what was happening. We were in the kitchen and it was like I closed my eyes for a second and when I opened them, everyone was *gone*. And it was so dark and I couldn't see and I thought I was back at my apartment and that none of it had happened at all… and oh God, Oliver, I thought it was all a dream. I thought none of it had happened and I…"

He can barely understand what she's saying, but he catches the gist of it.

"I'm so sorry," he says, holding onto her just as hard. "Your mom came in and I didn't want to wake you."

"My mom?" she replies breathlessly. "My mom was here?"

"Yeah. Just now."

"She was?" Felicity repeats, sounding a little hysterical. She pulls back, looking around, but the room is still cloaked in darkness. "I didn't…"

"Hey," Oliver says, cupping her face, forcing her to look back at him. The light from the hallway is enough for him to catch the gentle lines of her face. Her skin is painfully swollen from crying, and even in the shadows he can see it's red and tender, her eyes bloodshot and shiny. He runs his thumbs over her cheeks, wincing along with her, although she doesn't seem to notice. "It's okay. You're okay."

She stares at him. She doesn't believe him.

"Hey," he repeats, making his voice stronger. "Say it with me, baby, okay? We're okay. Come on… *Please*."

Felicity just blinks. And then she shakes her head. Her voice is

painfully small as she says, "But Ellie's gone."

His already broken heart shatters.

Oliver's own grief rears its head again and he bites the tip of his tongue to keep from giving into it as he nods. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah. Ellie's gone."

"My baby's gone," Felicity says, her voice breaking. "She's gone, our little girl is *gone*, and she's… Oliver, she's… Oh god, what if she doesn't… if she isn't…"

She lets out a low painful wail that he will never forget as she curls her fingers into his shirt. She makes tight fists, like she's trying desperately to find something that will keep her above water, but she's failing. Her tears coat his fingers where he still holds her face, pained sounds coming from deep in her chest. Felicity gasps for air as she starts crying again. They're deep bids for oxygen she's clearly not getting, and they get worse with each attempt until she's getting nothing at all.

God, she's having a panic attack.

"Whoa, whoa, easy." Oliver picks her up and moves her to the bed. He sets her down, kneeling in front of her, urging her to lean over, towards him. "Breathe, honey."

She doesn't. He's not even sure she's trying - he's not sure she's all that aware, to be honest, which is *terrifying*. His own panicked fear rushes through him, leaving nothing behind but action. The only thing that matters is her right now, making sure she's okay… and that's what he does.

Oliver moves swiftly. He picks her up again and lays her on the bed, climbing on with her. He whispers soothing words - he's not entirely sure what he's saying as he moves, but it keeps him focused, gives him something to hone in on as he acts. He has no idea if what he's going to do will work, but he has to try.

He lays down next to her and pulls her back flush against his chest. Oliver wraps his arm around her, cocooning her, pressing his hand over her heart. It's *racing*.

"Easy, easy… Breathe with me, Felicity, breathe… In… out… in… out. Feel me breathing, match me… Come on, sweetheart, match my breathing… just like that, good… *Good*. Good, keep doing that…"

It works.

Her gasps slowly even out as she breathes with him. Her heart takes longer, and it pounds against his palm. Just as her breathing matched his, his heart matches hers. Terror-laced adrenaline floods his system, making his arms feel like they aren't even attached to his body. A thousand scenarios race through his head - what if he can't help her? What if something happens to her, right here and now? What if something happens to the baby? He shouldn't have left, he should never have left her alone. His future self had told him to give her space, but this wasn't the time for that. She'd needed him and he hadn't been there… What if he made everything worse, what if he…

But then her heart starts to slow, finally, as she relaxes.

"Good," he breathes, his mouth hovering over her ear. He hugs her tighter, not letting her go for anything. "I've got you. I've got you."

Her only response is a stuttered sob. Felicity turns her face into the pillow, curling in on herself.

Oliver doesn't let her go. He molds his body to hers, needing her to know he's there.

He has no idea how much time passes, how long they both lay there. He isn't sure if she's asleep, or if he's fallen asleep, or what's really going on until her hand suddenly covers his where it still hovers over her heart.

"Promise me," she says, the words rough with exhaustion and pain.

His response is instinctive. "Anything."

"Whatever…" she starts before her voice gives out. She coughs, lacing her fingers through his. "Promise me that whatever happens between us, we make September third happen."

"What?" he whispers, frowning. He tries to sit up, wanting to pull her back so he can see her face, but he's too wrapped around her and she isn't letting go. In fact, she holds onto him even harder. "Whatever happens…? Felicity…"

"Promise me, Oliver," she interrupts, an unexpected strength ringing in her voice. "*Promise me.*"

"I promise," he says. He grips her fingers tight, making a fist over her

heart. "I promise, Felicity. We will have her again, I promise you that… and I promise that I'm not going anywhere. I'm here, okay? I'm *here*…"

She doesn't reply. Instead he feels her nod - it's a short, definitive nod, confirming what he just said, but she still doesn't say anything.

Later, he'll realize it was this moment that turned everything upside down.

Felicity takes an unsteady breath, letting it out in a heavy exhale. Oliver does the same, spreading his hand out over her chest again, pressing his palm against her steady heart.

They don't speak again.

It takes a long while, but eventually the soft, slow pounding slowly puts him to sleep.

He snuggles closer to her, pressing his face against the back of her neck. He kisses the top of her spine, breathing her in - it's pure Felicity at this spot - before whispering, "I love you. I love you so much…"

He succumbs to his exhaustion before he hears her response.

Oliver doesn't really rest.

It's pure desperate fatigue that pulls him under, and it's nowhere near restful enough to call *sleep*. He exists in the same plane as he did back in the kitchen - his body slumbers, but his mind is awake, jumping all over the place. He swears he hears Ellie every other minute, in his dreams and in reality. He sees her in his head, but then a flash of blonde catches the corner of his eye only to remember that she isn't there. It's exhausting, and with each passing minute, he feels like he's being pushed closer and closer to a precipice, but never falling. Oblivion waits for him down below, but that last step is never taken.

He just… *exists*.

The jostling of the bed and Felicity yanking herself out of his arms pulls him out of it.

"Felicity?" Oliver pushes himself up in time to see her running to the bathroom. She doesn't bother with the door as she skids to a stop, dropping to her knees in front of the toilet just in time to vomit the contents of her stomach into the bowl. He can tell by her dry heaves

that there's nothing in there to come up. Oliver shoves himself up and out of bed, stumbling after her. Her agonized moans of discomfort grow louder the closer he gets. "Hey…"

Before he can reach her, though, she pushes herself up off the floor. The shadows are darker in the bathroom and all he sees is her vague outline as she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand before flushing the toilet.

"Are you okay?" he whispers.

"Yeah," she croaks out. He thinks he sees her nodding in the dark, judging by the way her lopsided ponytail moves. "I'm okay."

It takes him a second to realize her voice is… *off*.

Oliver moves to hug her, to pull her into his arms, needing to feel her close, but her hand lands on his chest, almost like she's stopping him.

She steps around him and back toward their room.

That wakes him up completely.

"Felicity?"

She stops in her tracks the instant she reaches the threshold, but not because of his words. He's not even sure she heard him, not when she really *sees* their room. Her eyes flit from the pillow castle to Ellie's toys to her dress on the floor. She stumbles back a step like it's a physical blow, her hand coming to her mouth again.

"Oh God," she moans, soaking it all in.

He's instantly at her side with a whispered, "Shh," his hand landing on her back. It only makes her tense up more, like a defensive, wounded animal ready to bolt.

"I can't stay here." It's so quiet he almost doesn't hear it at first. When the words do finally hit him, he can't wrap his mind around exactly what she's saying. Not until she says it again. Her voice shakes as she says, "I can't stay here. Oh my God, what am I doing here?"

"Hey, it's okay," he soothes. He tries to pull her into his arms, but she stumbles away from him, wrapping her arms around herself. He frowns at that, moving to follow her as he says, "Felicity?" before she casts her wide, terrified eyes at him.

The look on her face makes him freeze.

"She's everywhere," she says, staring at him. "I can't be here. I can't… do this." Her head jerks like she wants to look around, but she stops herself, squeezing her eyes shut before meeting his gaze again. "I have to go home," she announces in a strangely detached voice.

"What?" he asks, furrowing his brow. "You are home."

"*My* home, Oliver," she clarifies. The simplicity of her words totally sideswipes him. He can only blink at her, trying to understand. "Not this…" Felicity waves her hand toward the evidence of Ellie's presence, the mess of life she left behind. Whatever words she'd been searching for fail her. "Not *this*. I can't be here."

Oliver swallows hard around the rapidly forming lump in his throat. A tingling sensation works its way across his palms, making them burn. God, he wants to reach out to her, wants to hold her, but he doesn't know if he could bear it if she shied away from him again. So he doesn't move, letting his hands shake uneasily at his sides instead.

"Okay," he agrees, his voice rough. "Okay, we'll go. We'll stay at your place. I can ask Raisa to box things up for us here. For now."

He'll never quite be able to define the horrible look she gives him. Is it pity? Is it guilt? Is it regret? Is there a word for all of those things mixed together?

"I think… I think you should stay here."

His heart utterly stops. The words make no sense at first. Nothing that's happening right now makes sense, none of it, and it takes him far too long to understand what she's saying. She wants to leave… without him. She doesn't want to be with him.

If she could kill him with words alone, she might have.

When his pulse restarts, it goes triple time and it sends a flood of terror-laced denial through his body.

"What?" he rasps. "What are you…?"

"I can't…" She shakes her head fiercely, the tears in her eyes cresting again. "This isn't… I need some time, Oliver. I need… I need… I don't know what I need, but I need it alone. I need to be somewhere else, somewhere not here, somewhere…"

"Without me," he finishes. "That's what you mean. Somewhere *without me*."

"Oliver…" she starts, but it breaks off because as much as she doesn't want to agree, it's what she means. She looks to her toes, nodding at her feet before looking back up at him. She opens her mouth to confirm, but she can't. Not that he needs her to.

It completely guts him.

"Felicity," he croaks, taking a step towards her. She's quick to respond, stepping back, her hand coming up as if to ward him off. "We… we need to lean on each other right now. I will go absolutely anywhere you want to, but please don't leave without me. Please don't go."

"I just need time," she whispers, as if that makes it better. His shoulders fall, his eyes slipping shut of their own accord at what she's saying. *Time*. Away from him. Without him. "That's all. Just… I have to go. I need to. And I need you to let me."

"No," he denies, shaking his head fiercely. "No, this isn't the way we do this. It's not. I know this is awful, but-"

"*Awful*?" she interrupts, a strange brand of anger filling her voice. "You think awful is enough to cover what happened, Oliver? I just lost my daughter!"

Her words suck the air out of his lungs. They echo off the bathroom walls, ringing in his ears. The beat of silence that follows feels endless. Their eyes lock and every inch of Oliver's heart shatters, falling to the ground in splinters that only she can piece back together.

"So did I," he finally replies, sucking in a ragged breath. "I just didn't think I was losing you, too."

"I'm not…" She's trembling as she cuts herself off. "I can't do this. I can't. I need to go. I need to…" She looks around, wide-eyed and wild, hugging herself tighter. "I *can't*. I need…"

The last words his future self had told him suddenly ring loudly in his ear: "*Give her space when she wants it, but don't let her run."*

He's not sure which this is, and that has hopelessness filling his chest, pulling him under. He doesn't want to let her go, it's the last thing he wants to do. He wants to hold onto her tighter, because this can't possibly be right, and yet...

"Okay," Oliver says. It's not okay, it's so far from okay. The words keep coming, though, even as nausea surges through him. "O-okay. Do… Do what you need to, Felicity. I'm not going to fight you on this." Relief skates over her face and that hurts just as much, especially when her eyes widen at his next words. "But I'm also not going anywhere." Oliver stares at her, trying to convey everything he's feeling - everything he's *ever* felt for her - with that one look. "The instant you need me - the moment you *want* me - all you have to do is call."

She nods, but she doesn't look him in the eyes, and he knows, without a doubt, that she doesn't believe him.

God, when had he ever given her cause to doubt him, to doubt *them*? How is this happening? How did everything go so *wrong*, so *fast*?

"I mean it, Felicity," he tells her. "I'm *here*."

She purses her lips, looking down. "Okay." She doesn't sound any more convinced than she looked a moment ago and he feels the irrational urge to grab hold of her again and never let go.

But he doesn't.

"If you won't let me be there for you," he says, the words nearly getting stuck in his throat, "will you please let your mom?" He feels like begging. He needs her to be okay. He needs their baby to be okay. And he can't stand the idea of her going through this all alone. "Please?"

Felicity blinks back tears as she whispers, "Yeah."

It's enough to make him feel like he can almost breathe again.

"Thank you."

He wants to kiss her, to pull her into his arms and comfort her, to make everything okay, but he can't begin to do any of that if she won't let him. He can't remember a time when she wouldn't let him, and not just in the last month. She's always been so selfless with herself - if it wasn't for her sake, she let him do it for his own. But now she's not and he has no idea what to do. He's hard-pressed to think of the last time he felt quite so helpless on an emotional front in his life.

She has no idea the power she has over him. He's certain of it.

"I'm not going anywhere, Felicity," he tells her again. "And I'll give you

space, if that's what you need, because I love you so damn much, but I won't let you go."

Felicity shakes her head, closing her eyes. "I'm not asking you to," she chokes out.

But she is, he thinks. That's exactly what she's doing.

"I'm not letting you go," he repeats. "Not without a fight. Do you understand?"

She finally meets his eyes. She nods warily in response, and he knows she's doing it for his benefit. She doesn't get it, she doesn't understand. That makes this so much harder… but they'll cope. Because he will never, *ever* give up on her and he will do everything in his power to prove to her that he is never going anywhere, that he's in this for the rest of his life. If that means he has to let her go right now, let her handle this in her own way, he will… even if it's killing him in the process.

"I love you." Oliver pushes as much emotion into his voice as he possibly can as she turns away from him, turning back to their room. That's what it is - *theirs*. This doesn't change that. "I love you, Felicity."

She stops in the darkened space before their bed, the pillow castle to her side and Ellie's dress at her feet. She looks back over her shoulder, eyes shiny with unspent tears.

"I love you, too," she echoes, her voice cracking as she soaks him in.

He knows this look. It's the same one he gave Ellie before he handed her off to his future self. It's the look you give when you're trying to take in every single detail about someone because you think you'll never have that chance again.

Being on the receiving end of that socks the wind right out of him.

It's over as quickly as it started. Before he can reply, before he can even take a step in her direction or form a thought, much less words, Felicity severs the connection between. He barely gets out her name before she's scooping up the elephant off the bed and hurrying out the door, taking the remnants of his heart with her.

Darkness surrounds him, absorbs him, damned near swallows him whole.

The only light in the room is through the half open door to the hall, the way Felicity had gone, and he stands in the middle of the ruins of *everything.*

It's the most alone he's been since the moment his father had put a gun to his own head and pulled the trigger.

The silence is deafening, roaring dully in his ears.

It's all low hums of electricity and the ticking of clocks; they burn into his consciousness with an almost violent volume. Everything is just *heightened…*

He catches the sharp sound of his mother's voice rising from downstairs, defensive and accusatory - on his behalf no doubt - and Felicity's counters in short, sharp bursts of words that are meant to deflect and get her *out.* Despite the way she talks, he can hear how broken she is even from where she left him. He can't make the words out, he's not even sure how many people are talking at one point, not that he cares - he only concentrates on her.

The front door suddenly slams. It's all he needs to give into the pain swelling inside him. The voices downstairs change, turning into a quiet murmur as a car starts outside. God, he hopes she's not driving herself. He hopes she allows for that much help, at least, even if she won't let him be the one to give it.

He catches the sound of the engine revving and then…

She's gone. Just like Ellie, she's gone.

A gutwrenching moan echoes from deep in his chest.

Is it him? Does she look at him now and see Ellie? Does she not trust in him to be there? To *stay*? Does she think he isn't worth it? That *they* aren't worth it?

The questions circle around in his mind, haunting him with their horrible implications.

It takes him a moment to realize that the sounds of the car had faded into the night, that the voices downstairs have silenced, and all that's left is the lifeless noises of a dormant house waiting for its family to come along and give it life again.

And there had been so much life here. If he shuts his eyes, if he just

holds onto the way it was for an instant, he can almost feel it coursing through him. But that was a month ago, a week ago, this morning…

It's not now, and there's nothing he can do in this moment to bring it back.

"What can I do for you?"

Oliver's head whips up at the voice. His mother stands in the doorway, a solemn air surrounding her. Desperation lines her face and she suddenly looks so much older, like the last hours have passed by as years for her. He can only imagine how she feels, what *she's* going through. The kind of pain he's bearing right now, he'd do anything to keep Ellie from feeling like this. The reminder of that gift that Ellie gave him - the ability to understand his mother's role as a parent - is another knife to the gut.

"I don't know," he tells her honestly. "I just… Can you have someone make sure she gets home okay, please? Ask Frank or…"

"Mister Diggle drove her and her mother," Moira replies.

Oliver sighs in relief, feeling a whole new rush of gratitude for his friend. That's one less concern anyhow.

"Thank you," he breathes out. He rubs his hands against his forehead before digging his fingertips into his eyes. He wants to say more, to just *talk*, but he's got nothing.

The last few hours replay before him as he presses against his eyes hard enough that he sees spots in the darkness.

How the hell had he gotten *here*? How had this even happened?

"I'm so sorry, Oliver," his mother says. It's so genuine, so pained, and he doesn't know what to do with that either, because he can't even barely begin to process his own pain. He has no idea what to do with his mother's.

"Me, too," he replies just as hoarsely, dropping his hands to his sides. "But they're… They're both where they need to be right now."

His mother lets out a quiet huff in disagreement before striding into the darkness to wrap her arms around him. A big part of him doesn't want to lean on her, not after everything, but he can't help it. He needs this.

"I'm not quite certain that's true," Moira says into his shoulder, "but I'm exactly where *I* need to be."

"Mom…" he tries, but his voice lodges in his throat and he can't quite form the whole word.

"I have made a great many mistakes over the years, Oliver," his mother says, pulling back and cupping his jaw with her hands. "And I know I still have amends to make for many of them. But I have always, *always* loved you, my beautiful boy. And I will be here for you and your sister as long as there is breath left in my body."

His whole body sags against her, taking all the support she's offering, all the support he didn't know he needed so very badly. Without even realizing it, he starts crying again. He needs to, he knows that, and he doesn't bother trying to filter it in front of his mother. He just doesn't have the energy to.

"I'd do anything for them, Mom," he whispers. "Anything at all. I love them so much and I never thought… I never thought I'd have that. Not after everything. And to watch them both just walk away? I don't know how to do this. How do I do this without her?"

He's not even sure which 'her' he means. It all just spills out, like now that he's started opening up to his mother, he can't contain any of it.

Moira just grips him tighter, winding her arms around him again, cradling his head against her shoulder.

"Bit by bit," she tells him. "Just like Ellie said. Day by day with the knowledge that there's *hope* ahead of you."

It's not a cure-all, but nothing can be, so he takes the comfort she offers as he cries over the loss of his family.

After a while, his tears run dry and a bone deep exhaustion sets in.

"I will be just down the hall if you need anything," his mother tells him when he says he'd like to get some rest. "Anything at all, at any time. Okay?"

He nods and kisses her cheek, thanking her. There are still issues for them to talk over - a *son* she'd kept from him - but that is all very much on the back burner for the moment. There aren't words for how bewildered and *livid* he is that she'd kept his son from him, but he also recognizes that she's his mother. He loves her in spite of all she's done

and she's proven tonight, yet again, how very much she loves him. Her intentions have always been flawed, but in her eyes, they're pure. It doesn't fix anything, and it won't for a while, but he does get it.

It's something else Ellie helped him with.

She finally leaves and for a long time, he doesn't move. He's so *tired*. He doesn't want to think anymore, doesn't want to cry anymore, doesn't want to process *anything*.

Oliver looks toward the bed, but what it represents haunts him all over again. It'd been jarring to think that Ellie wouldn't be there with them, but now Felicity isn't either. He knows if he sleeps there, his arms will ache for them both, and he can't do that to himself. Not tonight. This is hard enough as it is.

Instead, Oliver crawls inside the pillow castle. It was their first real project together, he and Ellie… and it's the first place he'd *really* kissed Felicity. It torments him just as much as the bed, but at least here he's surrounded by their presence instead of missing it in his empty arms.

Oliver wraps himself up in the afghan, pillowing his head on a sofa pillow and a pile of stuffed animals. Ellie's discarded dress is just within arm's length away and he gives into temptation, grabbing it and pulling it close. He shuts his eyes, breathing in deeply. It smells like her - like home, like his family. It's both comforting and painful at the same time, but he doesn't give it up. He can't. He needs them, he always will, and this is all he has to hold onto for the moment.

So he clings to it.

He curls up with Ellie's dress next to his face and falls into a dreamless sleep.

The next three days are some of the worst in recent memory.

He talks to Donna daily, but Felicity doesn't call or text once. He picks up the phone countless times, his thumb hovering over her number while other times he types out a text before deleting it. He does this, over and over, but never taking that final step. He gives her space, lets her breathe and process without him, even though his heart utterly aches to do so.

He focuses on little things, on other people. He helps Raisa pack up Ellie's things, keeping her art out to frame along with that little dress to hang in his closet. Raisa looks at him worriedly the whole time, but

he promises her he's coping.

And he is.

Thea gets the bulk of his attention. Part of him needs to take care of someone else and since that can't be Felicity or Ellie, the easiest recipient of that attention is Thea.

She's not well.

The drug cocktail Caitlin creates for her works, but they discover the hard way that it's only for about twelve hours at a time. She is functional, but it's hindered by the very real terror of losing control. Caitlin seems doubtful that they'll be able to do more than manage her symptoms. She doesn't think a cure is going to be possible.

But Thea *is* better, and that's the important part.

He tells her stories, relating everything he can think of about Ellie, keeping her memory alive through talking about her. Their mother often stands in the doorway, listening, sometimes chiming in. At times it's too much, and the feeling of loss overwhelms him, rendering him speechless.

He lets himself cry, not bothering to hide it from his mom or his sister.

On the second day, Digg and Lyla come by.

They're hesitant at first, but not for the reason Oliver thinks. It turns out they've gotten copies of every photo of Ellie they could find - happy shots from the surveillance cameras, from their cell phones, from the press - and they've put it all on a digital picture frame.

He can't quite tell them thank you - it gets stuck in his throat when he tries. He cherishes it so much that he's not sure he could express it through words anyhow.

He doesn't let himself get lost in staring at it, though.

It's hard, but he manages. Two rotations all the way through a day, he tells himself, that's what he's allowed. And it's all he does.

Remembering her is crucial, but he can't lose himself in that. Not if he wants to move forward. And he *does*.

He needs to.

They give a digital frame to Felicity, too, he finds out. She hadn't answered her door when they'd gone by, her mother greeting them in her stead.

Donna tells him that night that she won't even turn it on.

It breaks his heart.

He goes by the hospital, but it's more to see Sara than Laurel. They won't let him in to see her anyhow - her situation is far too perilous for visitors. The information from his future self about a blood clot spared her life, but it didn't save her from the complications of her injuries. She'd developed an infection, one that was bad enough they had to remove an entire lobe of her lung. The chances of her being the same are so slim they're nearly zero.

Laurel will soldier through it, because she's resilient - of that he has no doubt - but Sara isn't handling it well at all. She needs an enemy, one she can fight, and the lack of one is driving her crazy.

She tells him she's going to stay and help her sister for as long as it takes, but Oliver knows she won't be able to do that for long. She'll want to, but Sara's not the sort to stick around one place longer than she absolutely needs to, and her need for a good fight grows every day. He's just grateful that she doesn't seem to want to take it out on *him* anymore.

She won't talk about Thea, though.

On the third day, he picks up the phone and calls Samantha.

To say that she's unhappy to hear from him would be something of an understatement. One of the first things out of her mouth is that she doesn't want him near her son - *their* son. But he's already lost one child and he's not about to lose another. Her ultimatums and demands all turn to dust when he tells her he really doesn't want to meet his son for the first time in front of a judge, but he will if he has to.

Her silence on the other end of the phone is a physical weight on his shoulders.

He tones it down after that, assuring her that he doesn't have any intention to sue for custody or uproot his son's world entirely. He just wants to meet his boy, to be a part of his life, to be a *dad*. It doesn't even have to be right away, he tells her. There's a lot going on at the moment and if she wants to take some time, introduce the idea to him

slowly, that's more than fine with him.

She breathes out a huge sigh of relief at that, admitting she'd expected so much worse. Then she asks him when he got so level-headed. The minute he washed up on shore, he tells her. She's not sure how to respond to that, so she doesn't. When she tries to tell him he can't tell anyone about his son, he tells her that everyone in his life already knows. His mother, his sister, his best friend, the love of his life. He has no desire to tell the press, but the people who matter? They're already at his side. There's really nothing she can say to counter that.

They hang up the phone with an agreement that the two of them will meet for coffee the next week to talk over details of how this will all work. He tells her he might bring someone with, someone named Felicity, and that she needs a seat at this table, too, because she's going to be the mother of William's half-sister… And one day soon he hopes to make her his son's step-mother.

He really can't quite interpret the long silence before she offers her congratulations and an agreement, but then he'd never known Samantha all that well.

The call feels good, though. It feels *right*.

When he hangs up, he sees his mother looking at him from across the kitchen with more respect in her eyes than he might have expected. She offers a thin, affectionate smile and a shake of her head.

"I am so very proud of you," she says. He's not certain how to respond to that because he's not sure *what* she's proud about, exactly. But she's not done talking. "You have always had the best of hearts and you have proven from the moment that boat sank that you are an incredibly strong man, but these past few days…"

Oliver shifts awkwardly at that, watching her, waiting for her to finish. These last days hadn't been easy - *at all* - and not just because he lost Ellie and Felicity, but because he and his mother had been talking. A lot. About everything. And it hadn't been easy.

"I cannot begin to understand how you have shouldered this so well, Oliver." Moira shakes her head. "You've let yourself grieve while still moving forward. You've been supportive to others when you could easily have cared only for yourself. You've given space without distancing yourself. I am so very impressed by the man you've become, the father you are and will be. To Ellie, to William… and to your new child."

"Mom…" He pauses, trying to come up with a response, but he's got nothing. "It's not like I had much of a choice. I'm just…"

He's just reacting, doing what he can.

Moira lets out a short, humorless laugh before raising an eyebrow at him. "I think we both know that's not true. There's always a choice."

Oliver gives her an uneasy smile at her, because he can't think of any other way to reply.

"It's time, Oliver," she tells him. He frowns, but she's not finished yet. "You need to tell her it's time to stop hiding."

It is not an accident that she's segued from talking about how exceptionally he's handling things to talking about Felicity.

His mother is only subtle when she wants to be.

And it makes him hesitate. He shifts his phone from one hand to the other, his heart pounding faster at the very thought. God, he wants to go to her. He's *been* wanting to go to her. How many times had he started to call her, or he'd gotten in the car to go to her? He wants to be with her. But he doesn't know if he should. Is she ready? At what point does it go from giving her room to letting her run? And if she's not ready…

He's so terrified of what that might mean. He can't stand the thought that maybe he only had everything he's ever wanted for *a month* just to lose it for the rest of his life.

"Is it?" he asks.

It's meant rhetorically, but his mother either doesn't recognize that or doesn't care.

"It is," she tells him. "I've been speaking with Donna."

Oliver's eyes widen. He probably shouldn't be too surprised. His mother and Felicity's had grown close at some point over the past few weeks, both of them bonding over their granddaughter. But the idea still throws him. Because the idea of his mother chatting with *Donna*… it's just foreign.

"She's not coping, Oliver," Moira says. A wall of pain slams into him at that and he bows his head. Moira's lips pinch in sympathy and pity

and he swallows hard around the lump forming in his throat. "She barely even talks to Donna. She only eats when she's reminded and even then probably only because of the baby. She needs *help*, Oliver, whether she wants it or not. She needs *you*, and she needs to know that you aren't going anywhere."

"I told her that," he whispers. "I told her I'm *here*. Whenever she needs me…"

"I know you did." Moira stares at him. "And now it's time to prove it."

It's time to fight for his family.

Chapter 41

Stale air fills Felicity's apartment.

It's dead space, uninhabited for weeks, and the lack of life - *the hollowness* - makes Felicity want to sink in and bury herself in it. To disappear. The world outside is too much, too vibrant. The sun starts to rise when they reach her building, and the warmth it gives everything makes her shrink away. She's not part of that anymore, and she doesn't want to be. The cold, dry air inside is better. It's the only place she feels like she can *breathe*.

Her mom's there, but she wishes she weren't. Her mother's energy is suffocating, making her skin feel itchy and tight, which only adds to the throbbing in her head. Donna Smoak is overwhelming on the best of days, and Felicity doesn't have it in her to deal with her mom right now. She doesn't have it in her to deal with *anything* right now.

And Donna just doesn't get it.

When they get inside, her mother tries to open a window, to '*air the place out.'* Felicity's there before the older woman can so much as blink. She slams it shut again with a brutal finality and a harried, "*No, no, I don't want it open, I don't want anything open."* An unreasonable amount of panic fills her voice and she knows it, but she can't help it. Letting the outside world in is unthinkable right now. The hustle and bustle of the living world has no place in her life. She doesn't want it to.

She's snappish and short-tempered. Donna tries to talk to her - to get her to open up about the fact that one of the most precious things in her life is gone - but she doesn't want to hear it. She pushes past her mother, putting distance between them with a harsh, "*Mom,* please."

Time passes in a haze.

It gets lighter and darker and lighter again. It's the only way she knows it's been days, but that's as far as her awareness of the world around her goes. Food tastes like ash in her mouth, but she eats when her mother prods her to, mostly because she can't manage the motivation to fight her on it. She's not hungry. She sleeps sometimes, but it's not on any kind of schedule; it's occasional moments where she drifts off from her perpetual spot on the couch. She more or less lives there now, wrapped in an old blanket, the stuffed elephant always in

her lap.

She can't stop staring at it.

Its glassy lifeless eyes merely stare up at her, looking as hollow as she feels.

They're a mocking reminder that all of this was real, that her daughter was real, that every moment with Oliver was real. Most of the time she wishes she'd left it with him, but she can't get herself to put it away. Every time the thought comes up, she grips the elephant tighter, in case someone tries to take it away. As much as she wants to let it go, her heart won't let her.

Traitor.

The only thing she lets herself think about is Ellie leaving.

It plays on repeat in her mind, that loss cycling over and over and over. She should have known better than to get so attached to her - no, she *had* known better. And she'd tried… hadn't she? Some part of her had tried, she's almost sure of it, tried to keep distance, to remember that Ellie wasn't *hers*. But it'd been inevitable. It isn't fair, or right, because people *leave*. Felicity knows that. God, does she know that. She hadn't insulated herself enough, not from the kind of pain that inevitably follows when someone is in your life one day and the next they're just…

Gone.

And she'd known it was coming, too.

Now she's left with a gaping hole in her being that aches no matter how hard she holds herself. It's not enough; it only makes the ache worse.

At some point, Donna makes her take a shower.

Felicity washes, but she doesn't feel clean. There's the surface of her skin, the one she scrubs raw, but then there's the reality underneath, the layer that nothing can touch. She spends too long staring at the drain, watching clear water swirl down until it's gone. Only when the shower starts to turn cold - really, it's when it starts peppering her with what feels like icy shards - does she turn it off.

She half-heartedly dries. All she wants to do is retreat to her place on

the sofa. She tugs on the clothes she doesn't remember putting on the counter - her mother must have - and slips on her glasses. They aren't her normal ones, they're her backups. Her others had been left at the manor, something she'd discovered when she'd tried reading the tag still attached to the stuffed elephant. She pulls open the door, pushing wet, tangled hair out of her face.

"Felicity."

She closes her eyes. Keeping them open feels like too much effort. "Mom…"

Donna closes the distance between them, her heels muted in the carpet. Her mother is quiet - conspicuously so - and when she doesn't say a word for a full minute, Felicity finally opens her eyes again.

She's holding a pregnancy text box in her hand.

Felicity's stomach dips so low she feels it pulling on her heart and, for a split second, she feels *something*. It cuts a vicious swath through her, burning into her chest cavity like acid as she stares at the box. It happens in the blink of an eye, so fleeting she barely gets the chance to recognize it, but then it's gone just as fast.

A wave of numbness sweeps through her, enveloping the feeling, making it disappear.

"What is this?" Felicity asks. The words are dull and withdrawn. She's just so *tired*, and it's not even in the physical sense. Everything feels like it's too much, like breathing alone is taking up all of her expendable energy.

"Take it," her mother says, pushing the box into her hands. Donna doesn't wait to see if she's got a grip; she lets it go, forcing Felicity to catch it with fingers that don't feel like her own.

It's all pastel pinks and blues, promising answers in three minutes or less.

But she doesn't have any questions.

"We already know what it's going to say," Felicity says. It's true. She knows. Even if she's actively been pushing back thoughts of Oliver and Ellie and the baby for days now, even if she'd nearly forgotten and had a drink, even if she'd stared in surprise at the bottle of prenatal vitamins Donna had brought her yesterday. She still knows.

"Do you?" Donna asks. Felicity bristles at her knowing tone, and the tiny burst of anger in her chest feels surprisingly good as she narrows her eyes at her mother. Donna isn't the least bit deterred though. "Everything that happened this past month, everything you're avoiding right now? It all *happened*, Felicity. And if you can't accept that for yourself, or even for Oliver…"

Felicity flinches at his name. She hasn't heard it said out loud in a while. She's tried so *hard* not to think about him, not to focus on the longing that lives beneath her skin for the comfort of his arms around her. She already has to live through Ellie leaving her, and she still doesn't know how she's going to do that. But the thought of letting herself lean on Oliver, only to watch him walk away, too? No. She *can't*. Because people do that. They leave. People *always* leave. It's the one constant in her life.

She'd gotten so caught up in everything that she'd forgotten about that. It was too late with Ellie…

It doesn't have to be with Oliver.

"You need to, for that baby growing inside you right now."

Donna's words jolt her back to now, to this moment.

To the box in her hands, the one with an aggravatingly cheerful woman staring at a stick on the back as she waits for results.

She doesn't *need* this.

"Take the test," Donna orders, pointing with exaggerated effort at the box, like she knows exactly what Felicity's thinking. Before Felicity can reply though, Donna steps back. "I'm gonna go out for a walk."

Felicity blinks at her. "A walk?" She might as well have just said she's joining a cult dedicated to finding and rebuilding the ruins of Atlantis because if there's one thing Donna Smoak does not do, it's stroll around the block for fun. Felicity glances at the window, but the curtains are drawn in so tightly she can't really tell what time it is. "Outside?"

"Yes, Felicity, outside," the older woman replies, exasperation seeping out with every syllable. "You know, a *walk*. With fresh air and other people around you. Maybe a cup of coffee will be involved." Felicity just stares at her, earning herself a long, drawn-out sigh. Donna's shoulders sag, but not from exhaustion like Felicity's. With *sympathy*.

She steps closer again and cups Felicity's cheeks. She barely feels it. "There's a whole big, bright world out there, baby girl, and I don't want you to miss it. You shouldn't either."

A spark of *something* lights up in Felicity's chest, but it's so far away, so dim and unreachable that she doesn't recognize it.

All she can muster is staring back at her mother without a reply.

Donna sighs, her hands dropping. "Take the test, Felicity," she says tiredly. She turns, pausing long enough to grab her jean jacket where she'd draped it on Felicity's bed. The untouched bed, Felicity absently notes. That should prompt her to wonder where exactly her mother's been sleeping, but it doesn't. Not right now.

"Have a good time," Felicity says after her, her voice lacking any kind of inflection.

"Take the test," Donna repeats.

A burst of sunlight floods the hallway, just enough to make Felicity squint in discomfort, and then it's gone.

Leaving just her.

And the test.

For a long moment, Felicity stands there with the box in her hands, staring at it. She could drop it, right then and there, or throw it away. It'd be so easy to turn around and do just that, or toss it aside and go back to the sofa.

But she doesn't.

It takes a long time, but Felicity eventually turns on numb feet and heads back into the bathroom. After a few failed attempts to open the packaging, she's peeing on the stick. She'll never know why, exactly; maybe she just wanted to avoid the inevitable battle with her mother if she didn't.

Felicity can't bring herself to look at it after she's done. She sets it delicately on the counter, keeping her eyes averted. She turns it over, hiding the little window where something's already starting to come through - what exactly was three minutes or less? This was too fast, wasn't it? She picks it up, taking care to dry it off delicately before washing her hands, her eyes glued on the stick's reflection in the

mirror. It's so inconspicuous, so… *there*. So unremarkable.

Except it is remarkable. She knows it is, but…

What if?

She makes her way back to the sofa, to her safe spot, the test still in hand, the window still faced down. She curls up in a ball, wrapping the ever-present blanket around her shoulders, balancing the elephant on her knees as she stares unseeingly at the test.

It's not her that eventually turns it over, though, she never takes that final step on her own. She probably never would have had she not shifted, had the elephant not knocked it from her fingers, sending it falling to the floor.

With a startled and surprisingly desperate, "*Wait*," Felicity lurches after it, like she can somehow stop the inevitable.

The test lands face-up.

It's positive.

Of *course* it's positive, she'd known it would be, but for some reason it surprises her.

The little plus sign shines up at her, bold and unmistakable.

She's pregnant.

Felicity picks it up. She shakes it, like it might erase and show her the real answer. But the indicator doesn't go away, and it doesn't change.

She takes a breath. It feels like she's breathing through a straw as her heart takes off in a wild stutter. Even more than the elephant, this is solid proof that everything was *real*, that it's *still* real, that the impact on her life from the last month is resounding, and lifelong.

Part of her hadn't believed it, she realizes all of a sudden. Part of her had thought it was some beautiful, terrible fever dream. But it's not.

Ellie had been real.

Her love with Oliver had been real.

This baby is real.

And the proof is staring up at her in the form of an undeniable little pink plus sign.

What the hell is she going to do? God, what the hell is she *doing*?

It's too much. The tightness that rushes through her makes her insides seize, and she suddenly can't breathe.

A wave of nausea hits her for the first time in days - she *thinks* it's days; she's not sure anymore - but she pushes it back down, trying to suck in air instead. She can't. God, she *can't*, it's too stifling.

She can't *breathe*.

Gripping the pregnancy test into a tight fist, Felicity launches herself over to the window and rips the curtains open. The sunrays that instantly flood the room are blinding, and she blinks against them, fumbling with the lock. It's taking too long, and she can't fathom that it's the test she refuses to let go of that's hindering her, until she finally gets the latch opened.

Felicity throws the window open.

A warm breeze rushes in, filling her lungs in a tidal wave of fresh air. She gasps as it flows through her. That's not the only thing though. A car honks somewhere down the street; someone laughs, echoing the chirping of birds in the daylight of late morning.

She needs this, she knows she does, but it's somehow *more* overwhelming. It's all a brutal reminder that the world keeps going, keeps moving, unchanged from what it had been yesterday and the day before that… keeping on even when her entire foundation had been rocked to its core.

Tears flood her eyes, burning the tender skin around her eyes. She doesn't remember crying the last few days, but she must have been because her face suddenly hurts like it's all she's been doing.

Felicity stumbles back, grabbing the arm of the sofa with her free hand before sinking into the cushions again. The discarded blanket is a lump underneath her and the elephant… She picks it up, crushing it to her chest, the test still tight in her fist. She's so very lost, but for the first time in days she's actually *aware* of it. It presses down on her in a different way than before, a sense of panic welling up as her head starts spinning.

What is she going to do? How is she going to handle this?

A knock against the front door cuts her off mid-breakdown.

With an aggravated huff, she says, "You don't have to knock, Mom." Her voice is rough and she swallows to clear her throat before adding, "Just come in."

You'd think her mother would have this figured out by now. She's dead-set on being intrusive in every other possible way, so the notion that she still lingers for an invitation into the home she's basically taken over is silly. And now that Felicity's finally *thinking* for the first time in days, she realizes it's probably her mom's way of forcing her to interact more.

Her mother's too smart and conniving for her own good.

But when the door swings open and she looks toward the threshold, it's not her mother she sees.

No.

It's Oliver.

Her heart positively climbs up out of her chest, lodging itself in her throat. The sight of him on the other side of the door takes over everything for a split second, leaving nothing but them. Her panic subsides, her muscles easing from a tension she hadn't been letting herself feel as she takes him in. He's somehow made himself seem smaller, but his formidable size still fills the frame of the door. It should be threatening, because that's part of what makes The Arrow so intimidating, but it isn't.

He's just Oliver.

And he's *here*.

"Oh," she breathes out. Her fingers twitch, clenching the elephant tighter. "Oh…"

"Hi," he says, so softly she barely hears him. Or maybe it's the rush of blood in her ears or her suddenly way-too-fast breathing she's hearing. Despite that, his voice is a gentle balm, smoothing over the uneven edges of her soul. He's all uncertainty where he stands, wearing a well-worn flannel shirt she's never seen before. His hands slip into his pockets as he asks, a little more clearly, "Can I come in?"

There's so much longing in his voice that it hits her like a physical blow, knocking the breath right out of her. When their gazes lock, some part of her wants to turn away - to *hide* - but she can't. Not now. Not from him. The sorrow in his eyes is tangible and it has her taking a shaky breath as she gives him a jerky nod.

"That's… yeah," she croaks. Felicity clears her throat. "Yeah, of course you can."

Oliver raises an eyebrow at that, but does her the courtesy of not pointing out that her statement isn't anywhere near as much of a given as she seems to imply. It's not the words themselves, so much as her tone - she's rattled. But there's still a detachment lingering in her voice that's almost alarming.

Felicity's eyes drop back down to the elephant in her hand as she takes a deep breath, trying to center herself. She's aware of him stepping inside, cautiously, closing the door behind him, using just enough pressure to get it to latch.

When she looks back up a moment later, he's a lot closer, making her jump with a disconcerted, "Oh."

But he's not looking at her.

He's staring at the little plastic stick with a pink plus sign in her other hand.

"Is that…?" he starts, but emotion chokes the rest of the words from him.

"I just…" She lifts the test up, like maybe it might start talking for her. "My mom thought I needed…" Felicity can't find the words to explain what exactly she'd been doing, but when she meets his pained gaze, she knows she needs to keep trying. For him. "Something," she finishes lamely. "I needed something to see. To prove it was… to show me that…"

"That it was all real?" he finishes.

She hesitates before responding. Her mouth opens to form the word, '*Yeah,'* but it never comes. The quiet lasts so long that she eventually just lets it go. He doesn't need her to confirm it, though. There's no question for either of them that that's what she'd meant. She can tell her lack of reaction is the opposite of heartening. The line of his shoulders and the growing tension in his neck is equal parts sorrowful

and anxious.

They stare at each other for a beat before she looks away, swallowing hard.

"What are you doing here, Oliver?"

It comes out far more accusatory than she'd meant.

Oliver flinches, uneasiness dancing over his features. It's his turn to hesitate, and for a split second she wonders if he's going to turn around and leave. That thought alone has her wanting to reach for him, but she doesn't. And he doesn't leave. Instead, he takes a steadying breath and steps further into her living room.

Felicity watches with bated breath as he steps around the edges of her discarded blanket and sits next to her on the sofa. The cushions sink in, stirring up a familiar intimacy that makes her ache. He doesn't touch her, but his eyes feel like a caress anyhow. He looks at her like he's drinking in the sight of her and savoring it for all its worth.

It's overwhelming, more than it ever has been, and she tries to fight a shiver, but fails.

"I'm keeping a promise," he finally says after a moment.

Her heart skips a beat, because she knows exactly what that means. She blinks back a new rush of tears at that, but instead of answering right away, she just wonders if she'll ever stop crying. She should run out of tears at some point, shouldn't she? It doesn't seem logical that one person can cry as much as she has lately.

She's more than aware that she isn't handling this very well, but that doesn't stop her from staring at the elephant in her lap. She smooths its ears down unnecessarily.

Oliver shifts to face her more and an unexpected heat rushes up her chest, warming her cheeks; it's a sudden severe hyper-awareness of him, of everything she's been avoiding the last few days and the fact that he's keeping the promise his future self told him to. About her. About not letting her run. It's both terrifying and exciting… but she's also so very afraid that, unlike the child growing inside her, it's not real.

That it won't last.

Fear swirls in her chest and she whispers, "You don't have to." She can't block out the horribly pained noise that catches in his throat or the guilt that surges up inside her at the sound. She shakes her head. "This is… this was…"

"Don't say 'was,'" he chokes out. It comes out absolutely gutted and it has her eyes flying back to his. What she sees nearly splits her down the middle. He's looking at her like she's everything to him. She hates herself a little at the doubt lodging itself in her throat. "Please, God, Felicity… please don't say 'was.'"

"But… but none of this would have happened without… without her," Felicity says, the words tumbling out in a mess. She can't force Ellie's name past her lips. It's too hard, too much. Maybe later, maybe when thinking about her little girl doesn't leave her crippled. "We both know that, Oliver. We have proof of that, from…" She waves her hand at him. "From *you*. From future you, not now you. Or what would have been future you, if that was the future now, which it clearly isn't because everything that happened literally *split* our realities, and…"

And what if now that things have changed so drastically they don't get that future anymore?

A stab of alarm nearly has her biting her tongue, and for the first time she's vividly aware of the divide in her - she wants him, with a need that is almost unsettling, but what if she gives herself to him, and it doesn't last?

Oliver's staring at her, grief twisting his features. "Felicity…"

Felicity shakes her head. "We wouldn't have been together if not for her."

"*Yet*," he emphasizes, his hand moving to touch her knee. He stops himself just before he grazes her though, his hand hovering for a split second - she can feel the warmth of his palm, her body remembering his touch so clearly. He pulls it back, pinning her with his eyes instead. "We wouldn't have been together *yet*."

"Oliver," Felicity says, with a hint of exasperation. "Our lives are different now. They're different than what we would have had. And we *know* that, we know because we changed things so much, so what if… Was this all just… because we *knew* it would happen?"

"What?" he breathes.

"Was any of it really *us*?" she continues, talking over him. "Was any of it what you actually wanted? What we wanted?" It makes a horrible kind of sense and her doubts start coming on faster, a torrent of long-caged thoughts finally being voiced. They spill past her lips at breakneck speed, the dam holding them back finally broken. "God, Oliver, was this all just about her? Was it because you saw it, the evidence of us in her, and it just felt inevitable? Like our lives had been chosen for us, we didn't get a say? We didn't-"

"*Felicity.*" Oliver grips her ankle. Her eyes slips shut at the feel of his skin against hers. She sighs, the sound morphing into a tiny moan that makes him hold her tighter as he leans in closer. "Look at me."

"Oliver…"

"Felicity."

When she opens her eyes, her lashes are wet as her gaze finds his.

"I. Love. *You.*"

He says it with tremendous force, the gravity and weight and meaning in them translating through his touch. His thumb trembles against her skin, a stark contrast to the steady intensity in his eyes.

He believes what he's saying, absolutely. She knows he does. But there's a tiny voice in the back of her head, whispering, '*What if…?'* Like he somehow knows that, he slides his hand up her leg, urging her to not look away.

"This has *never* been about Ellie, not with us," he says. His eyes bore into hers. "I have loved you for so long…"

He stops, shaking his head, letting out an incredulous huff.

When Felicity looks back at this moment, when she has a second to think about how everything changed again, she's going to realize that it was that tiny pause, that tiny sound that made her believe him. Oliver Queen has always been a man of actions. It wasn't the words he spoke that used to make her wonder if things weren't as one-sided as she usually assumed, it was what he did. Whether it was touching her shoulder or his gaze lingering a little too long or bringing her a coffee before work.

It was his actions that made her fall in love with him, and it's because of that little noise he makes - like the depth of what he's feeling for

her amazes him, on so many levels - that breaks through the wall in her mind. It's just a crack… but that's all it takes for the light to shine through.

"This isn't fate, Felicity," Oliver says quietly. He smiles, a little quirk of his lips that somehow lights up his entire face. "It's so much better than that. This? What we have right now? *This* is choice. I love you. I *choose* you. And I will keep choosing you every day for the rest of my life."

Felicity bites her lip to keep in her sob. It almost works. Oliver leans in closer, his chest brushing against her shoulder and arm as he grips her leg tightly. Securely. Protectively. She doesn't question herself when she leans back into him, and she doesn't miss the relieved sigh that slips past his lips. The elephant still sits in her lap, but she lets it go to settle her hand over his.

Oliver instantly twists to capture her fingers in his, tangling them together.

"If that was a proposal," Felicity says, her voice cracking as she tries to smile, "it's the worst one I've ever heard."

The joke falls flat.

Oliver takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"When I propose to you," he replies heavily, "you'll know it."

Felicity's lungs seize up at the declaration and just like that, all her fears come back in an onslaught. A few tears slip down her cheeks as she protests in a strangled whisper, "Oliver…"

He moves until the gap between them disappears, until he's flush against her. His free hand comes up, brushing the tears away.

"Missing her these past few days has been hard," he says. The subject change takes her off guard. The sudden reminder of the fact that Ellie's gone rips her open, leaving her feeling painfully raw and exposed. But instead of running, this time she gives into the comfort he's offering. Felicity nods hard, leaning into his hand without even registering that she's doing it. Oliver's thumb brushes just under her eye, catching one more tear. "But missing you… It's been just as bad."

Felicity squeezes her eyes shut tighter. "I missed you, too," she says. It's quiet, but it's *real*. And it's *terrifying*. It feels like such a risk, such

an admission, even though some logical part of her starts to speak up that it's not like that. It never was.

His exhale of relief tells her maybe he's taking just as big a risk, making just as big an admission.

Hope creeps in through the cracks of her façade, and while it still scares the living hell out of her… she's also starting to realize it's worth it.

Maybe it always has been.

"I don't love you *because* of Ellie, Felicity," he tells her. "And I don't love you because of our new baby. I love you for *you*. I love the way you brighten up the whole room, even me. You always have, right from the beginning. I was *drawn* to you, to your light. Not because of how it made me feel, although that was part of it, but because it's *you*." She can't help it, she turns to look at him. He looks at her, that same outright adoration coloring his face. Instead of making her feel scared, this time it makes her feel warm. Like he's filling in all of the broken parts of her. "I love the way your brilliant mind works, even when I can't follow it." She smiles at that, which in turn makes his lips tug up. "I love your sense of humor and how when you look at something, you see the best in it." She almost speaks up then, because it's not like she's been doing that recently, but she bites her tongue. Oliver slides his hand further up her cheek, his fingers slipping into her still-wet hair. "If there was no Ellie, if there was no baby now, I'd still love you. Nothing changes that. Nothing ever could."

Felicity pulls her lip between her teeth before turning to nuzzle his palm. She presses her lips to his warm skin. He inhales softly, his fingers quaking against her. She can feel he's not done, that he's *scared*, and she isn't quite sure what to do with that. She's seen this man face down the very worst of humanity without an ounce of fear. But with her…

With her, he trembles.

"I will always choose you, Felicity," he repeats with vehemence. "But…" His voice becomes smaller as he continues, "But you get a choice, too. If you don't want this… if you don't want me…"

"What?" she gasps, her eyes flying back to his. The words don't compute. Not want him? There isn't a world where she wouldn't want him. The look on his face finally registers - he's so raw, so broken and vulnerable… because of *her*.

She did this to him. In doubting the sincerity of his feelings for her, doubting the last month that they'd shared…

She'd made him doubt them from her, too.

Felicity starts shaking her head, but he's already talking.

"All I can do is tell you I love you and I want this with you, both our family and just *us*. But I can't make you want it, too. I'm never going to leave you, honey. But if you don't want this, if you're going to leave again-"

"I didn't leave you," she blurts, gripping his hand. He blinks, his face going blank and she instantly recognizes it as his own method of self-protection. She shakes her head. "No, I… Oliver, I didn't… I didn't…"

But she had. Oh, she *had*. How had she even done that? In her utter terror of seeing him leave, she'd nearly destroyed everything by leaving him first.

"I didn't mean it that way," she says. "I *swear*." Felicity drops the test, twisting to face him. The movement has the elephant falling to the floor as she cups his face. The strain in his features melts away at her touch and it finally hits her just how much damage she's done. "Oh god, Oliver, I'm so sorry. I want this. I want *you*. I love you so much, and I didn't mean to make you doubt that."

Everything he's asking of her - to trust him, to believe in him and his love for her - is what she's asking in that moment.

Without an ounce of hesitation, she lets herself *feel*. The terror is still there, the worry and doubt and concern, but it's tempered by the knowledge that this man in front of her - this man she loves with every cell in her body - loves her back. And he's not going anywhere.

"I love you, Oliver," she says, stroking his cheeks, trying to infuse her love for him into her touch. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he replies, his eyes slipping shut.

He leans into her - no, he damn near collapses into her and unlike before, this time she's there to catch him. Yes, she's scared, but the thought of losing him, of never *having* him because her fear kept him away? Pushed him away? That is so much worse.

Felicity presses her forehead to his as Oliver's hands find her forearms.

His touch is almost desperate, like he's trying to make sure she's really there, that she's really holding him like she is. It breaks her heart, especially when he slides his palms down her arms and to her shoulders. They move down her sides, one gripping her hip while the other slides up her back. He's trembling again and it has guilt and pain roaring through her.

"I'm so sorry, Oliver," she says. "I just needed time. I was so scared, so sad… I…" She hesitates, her natural instinct to stop right there, to keep some distance, to protect herself… She ignores it. "I still am," she adds in a tiny voice.

"Me, too," he replies, swallowing hard as he nuzzles her hands. "Me, too." Oliver pulls back, just enough to meet her gaze. "But if this last month has taught me anything, it's that we're stronger together."

Felicity nods. "We are," she agrees. "We are. I was just… I was so afraid it wasn't real. That everything we had was just because of the situation, because of her. And I couldn't stand the thought of you realizing that and walking away from me. That maybe when you figured out that was all because of her being in our lives, that you'd…" The words gets stuck in her throat. "That you wouldn't want me anymore."

"Never," he swears, his tone so low and so strong that it sends a riot of shivers through her. "God, *never*. Felicity, I swear that could never have happened. I will always, *always* want you in my life. I swear. If you can't believe anything else, please believe that."

"I do," she whispers, nodding rapidly. A certainty she hadn't felt before, a belief in him - in *them* - washes through her, fortifies her. It makes everything they'd been through just a bit more bearable, just enough for her to finally pull her head up to the surface and learn how to breathe again. "Oliver, I do. I promise. I do."

She cups his jaw, sliding one hand up into his hair, her nails scraping over his ear. His breathing changes, and his entire frame is unsteady as he grips her tighter in return.

"Felicity…"

There's a tender uncertainty in his voice, in his touch, in everything, one she feels just as much.

She sighs, her breath caressing his lips.

This isn't about Ellie or the baby, not right now. It's about *them* and despite everything - or maybe because of it - they are strong. *Unified*. And they will last.

Felicity knows it to the marrow of her bones.

There's more to talk about, more to discuss, more to work through - God, there's so much more to work through - but right now…

Her lips brush against his and with a groan, Oliver kisses her.

It's like coming home. It's soft and gentle at first, tentative, but it's been so long since she's felt him like this, since she's been able to taste and touch and have him. Felicity lets out a needy whine from deep in her chest, and surges forward. Oliver opens for her and the second their tongues meet, a tension she didn't realize had been there *snaps*.

The kiss quickly morphs into something more, something *deeper*. Desperate gasps mix with moans as they pull the other closer. It's a response to the last few days, to what had happened, to what they lost, but it's also a recognition of what they've gained. Of what they're becoming. Of what they *will* be. *Together*.

Passion and love mix in with remnant fear inside her and it sends a nervous energy skating over the surface of her skin. It sinks into her, rushing through her blood, filling her lungs, making her heart pound. She needs him, she needs him with a desperation she's never felt before, and he's right there with her.

Felicity's hands drop down to the lapels of his shirt. She grips the soft material tightly, pulling him closer. An undeniable need surges through her, the need to feel him surrounding her, blanketing her, filling her… Oliver goes willingly, following her as she falls back.

Heat cuts a vicious swath through her, leaving her body throbbing.

God, she has to have him right now. Forever. Always. But especially right now. A physical reminder that this is really happening, that they're both here - and it's not just an affirmation of what exists between them, but something *more*. It's a need to *feel*, for herself. She's been so disconnected, and now that she's finally feeling, she wants it *all*.

Oliver falls against her, presses into her. It's not enough, though, and she doesn't have room to move her legs, to spread them apart.

Felicity whimpers, but he's already on the same page. Oliver pulls back enough to make room for her and she opens herself to him. His hands find her knees as he readjusts, climbing on top of her. She nods rapidly, grabbing him, pulling him closer. She needs this, she needs him, and when their eyes meet, she sees the same thing there. There's an almost manic gleam in his eyes, a quiet ferocity on his face that makes her shiver, but not in fear or worry.

With love.

It's *intense*, almost too intense, and some part of her recognizes that, but she can't stop. There's a strange compulsion, pushing her faster, harder…

More.

"Oliver," she moans just as he whispers, "Felicity," before he's on her.

Their lips meet in a passionate clash, her arms wrapping around him. He presses himself flush against her, and she can feel every inch of him through her thin yoga pants. It seems like she hasn't touched him in years, and she arches up into him, pulling her legs up to wind around his waist. The move lets him settle in even closer and they both moan at the sensation. There's a hunger for him that's taking up residence in her body, and it burns brighter when they start moving against each other. Her hips rock up to meet his as he moves against her, pressing her into the cushions, their lips never parting. She swallows his breathy moans, reveling in the quiet gasps for air that echo hers.

The friction is delicious and it courses through her, leaving nothing behind but this moment.

And that's all she needs right now. This. With him.

"Yes," she moans against his lips, nodding. "Oliver…"

His responding whimper melts her and she holds him tighter, urging herself to move against him with even more force. He may be on top of her, but she's the one guiding them right now. He goes along willingly, following her lead completely. Oliver trusts her so completely, with his heart, with his body, and it slowly starts healing the broken pieces inside her.

It's a stark reminder of what she'd done. She'd left him alone when he'd needed her. Her own fears of abandonment had driven her away,

leaving him to cope on his own, the same way she had.

In the long run, this isn't enough, and she knows that. But right now, it is… and that's all that matters.

They stay there for a long while, moving together, the kiss gradually slowing before escalating again. This isn't where she wants this to happen, but at the same time it *fits*. She came here to hide, to run away, and he followed her. This sofa has been her sanctuary as well as her self-imposed prison, and while it's just a piece of furniture, it somehow still means the world to share it with him. To let him in like this, in this spot. To free herself here, with him.

The heat between them slowly shifts, becoming something *more*. His whimpers change cadence, his hips moving with more alacrity. The hardness between his legs presses into her and it pushes her higher, her low cries for him becoming more insistent, more needy. They could move, they could shed their clothes and fully reconnect, but there's something about this that feels better, feels *right*.

It's like they're finding their way back to each other, and the sudden callback to their first time together - down in the Queen Manor gym - hits her. They're doing it again, but this time they're doing it on their own.

This is their choice. They're choosing each other without something outside of them pushing them together.

A sob laced with need slips from her throat and she doesn't realize she's crying until Oliver pulls back.

"Felicity?"

"I'm okay," she whispers, nodding against him. Her voice backs her up - she *is* okay. Because he's here. Because he didn't leave - no, he came back; he fought for her. She kisses him again as he whispers, "Are you sure?" She nods again with a, "Yes, yes," before deepening the kiss.

The fire between them burns hotter.

She won't last long, neither of them will, but the bliss they find themselves working towards is too good to ignore.

Which, of course, is why her mother chooses that exact moment to come back from her walk.

Felicity doesn't hear the sound of the doorknob twisting, but Oliver does.

He's off her faster than she can comprehend, pulling her up so she's halfway behind him as he puts himself between her and the door. His reaction stuns her - he's acting like a threat is on the other side of the door, and it's almost feral the way he stalks to the entryway, ready to meet it. She can't comprehend it - her mind's having a hard time making sense of going from *that* to *this* - when he opens the door.

"Oh!"

Donna's eyes widen with an incredulousness that is almost comical. Her jaw drops as she takes in Oliver in all his Arrow-like glory. It doesn't last long, but for that split second, Felicity knows her mother is seeing how truly terrifying this man can be. And he's doing that for *her* - to protect her. It has something Felicity didn't realize she'd been needing notching into place. And while she's pretty sure she's going to needle him a bit for his reaction when he's the one who suggested her mother come over with her, she can't help but feel the wonder that comes with knowing the man she loves will do anything for her.

Maybe even stay, no matter what.

Maybe forever.

And then the second is over.

"Oh," Oliver says, instantly falling back. "Donna. I'm… I'm sorry. I wasn't…"

He looks back at Felicity, a lost look in his eyes, like he wasn't entirely aware of his reaction either. She can only look up at him, and when his face softens, she knows he's seeing the awe and appreciation she's feeling.

When he looks back at Donna, he gives her a sheepish smile.

Her mother is still standing in the doorway, two cups of coffee gripped tight in her hands. She hasn't moved, but her face has transformed - into *excitement*. Her eyes dart between Felicity and Oliver, taking in their rumpled clothes and the very obvious state of…

When her eyes take all of Oliver in, her eyes widen for a very different reason, one that makes Oliver blush slightly. He ducks his head, backing up even further, nearly running into one of the side tables as

his hands drop, tugging his shirt down to cover the obvious bulge in his jeans.

So this is quickly morphing from surprising to mortifying.

"Uh…" Felicity starts, but Donna cuts her off.

"Don't let me interrupt," she says, holding up a few fingers from around the cups she holds to ward off whatever Felicity was about to say. "I'm just… I'm gonna go. Somewhere else. So you two can…"

Her words fade but the grin that covers her face says it all.

"Oh my god, Mom," Felicity breathes, standing up. She brushes her hair off her face - it's still a wet tangled mess, as is the shirt that's twisted around her torso. She glances down and it's her turn to blush when she sees the telltale hardness of her nipples visible through the thin material. She crosses her arms, ducking her head as she rolls her lips together. They're swollen and well-used and she probably has some stubble burn on her chin and cheek if the tiny pains she feels are any indication. "Uh, you don't…"

"No," Donna says, interrupting her again.

She's smiling, and now that Felicity is looking at her - *really* looking at her - she sees the edge of sadness there. She's happy, that much is obvious, but she's also been here for the last several days, watching Felicity just… sit there, collapsing in on herself in every way possible. She'd *tried*, but nothing she'd done had pulled Felicity out of her stupor.

Oliver had been the key.

Felicity catches a glimpse of shininess in her mother's eyes and it has her whispering, "Mom," but Donna waves her off again, stepping inside just enough to set the coffee cups on the table.

"I'm going to go, okay?" Donna says, looking between them, her voice muted - not with sadness, but with relief. She doesn't wait for a response before moving to Oliver. His eyes widen, his mouth opening to say something, but Donna grips his shoulders before he can, pushing up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "*Thank you*."

The words are said with a quiet but sincere intensity.

Felicity can only blink as she watches them, watches Oliver's features

soften into a gentle understanding and gratitude all his own. He nods, giving her a small smile. Something passes between them, something Felicity doesn't quite catch.

Donna turns back to her daughter. "I'm going to borrow your car, honey," she says, wiping her eyes. "I have some… errands to run. Lots of errands, like… shopping. Or something."

"O-okay," is all Felicity can manage.

"Okay," Donna says. She grabs Felicity's keys and then, with a far more knowing smile this time around, she looks at both of them before leaving again.

"Did that…" Felicity stares at the door. "Okay." Donna suddenly locks the door behind her, making Felicity jump. And then there's nothing left but their soft breathing. "So… I guess that's one way to kill the mood."

Oliver huffs out a chuckle, and she looks at him. He moves to take a step towards her when Felicity pulls her arms up and around herself. She doesn't realize she's doing it until he stops, his brow furrowing.

"Did she…?"

"What?" he asks.

The tiniest hint of shame hits her that she would even be *suggesting* this, but if it's the case, she needs to know. Felicity winds her arms around her middle and Oliver watches her move, not missing the meaning behind it. He doesn't come any closer, almost like he's afraid if he keeps moving, she'll scatter to the winds.

"Did she ask you to come over?" Felicity finally asks.

"What?" Oliver frowns. "No." He closes the distance between them, his fingers grazing down her arms. He doesn't fully touch her, she notices, just enough to show her he's really there. "No, *I* came here. Me. Nobody asked me to."

"It's just…" She waves her hands, forcing him to drop his to his side. "She was… I don't know. The way she's been acting lately, I guess… I wouldn't be surprised if she asked you - or told you, I guess, that I needed…"

"Hey," Oliver interrupts. His hands move towards her again, but he

stops himself. He makes tight fists, licking his lips as he ducks his head to catch her eye. "I haven't talked to your mom, Felicity. I swear. My mom has." That has Felicity's eyebrows shooting up, but he isn't done. "But not me. I was…" He sighs and shoves his hands into his pockets. "I was going to wait, actually."

Felicity's heart sinks at that. "You were?"

"I didn't know," he says. "I didn't know how much time was too much, or how much wasn't enough. I didn't know if… if it was your way of saying you were done, or…"

"No," Felicity says at the admission, reaching out for him. He moves at the same time, taking her hand as she grabs for his. It hurts just as much as it did when she first realized what she'd done. Not only to herself, but to him - to *them*. Felicity holds his hand in both of hers, pulling it up to her face. She kisses his palm before pressing it to her cheek as she shakes her head. He cups her jaw gently, his eyes dancing over her face. "I'm so sorry I did that to you."

"It's okay," he whispers.

"No," she croaks. "No, it wasn't. I was just… I'm so used to… being alone. Being on my own. Only having to look out for myself. And I'm pretty sure I did that on purpose." She lets out a wry chuckle. "Okay, I did do it on purpose. To protect myself from ever losing someone I care about. Someone I love."

Oliver steps closer, wrapping his other arm around her waist. "I'm not going anywhere."

Felicity looks up at him, into his eyes, and she believes him. There isn't a trace of doubt this time, or fear or worry or concern. God, she believes him and it's like she's opened that window all over again - light and fresh air and the ability to breathe surges through her.

"I know," she whispers. "I know that. It's just…" She squeezes her eyes shut, leaning into him. "When Ellie left…"

Her heart stops. It's the first time she's said Ellie's name out loud.

The tears come without warning, slipping down her cheeks as that realization hits her. A tiny sound of pain comes from Oliver as he kisses her forehead, whispering, "Shh," when a sob falls from her lips. "Shh…"

Felicity falls into him, letting him hold her up, and he does… just like he said he would.

Her words come out in an incoherent babble. She lets everything out, everything she's been holding in, everything she's been trying *not* to feel, ever since Ellie had gone back to her time.

"I loved her so much," she cries. "And then she was just gone. And I know it wasn't her fault, I know that, and I know it wasn't yours either, but that didn't change that she was just *gone*. She took part of me with her, and I've already lost so much, Oliver, I couldn't lose you, too. Because you are… you have all of me. I've given you everything, because I love you." She looks up at him. His eyes are red with his own tears, his face contorting with an emotion she feels in her bones. "I love you so much, Oliver, so much it scares me. I don't know… I don't know where you begin and I end, and that… it's almost *too* much, and…"

A frown pulls at Oliver's face as he tries to follow what she's saying. He shakes his head, a flash of fear and hurt skating over his features as he shifts *away* from her.

"No," Felicity gasps, following him, grabbing his shirt in a tight fist. "No, no, I didn't mean it like that. I mean, I did, but not like…" God, why can't she just *talk*? "What I'm trying to say is… the people I love, they leave. Or they don't see me, they don't… get me, but you…"

She pauses, shaking her head in wonder.

"You *do*. And that *terrifies* me, Oliver. It was different when Ellie was here, because she was…" Felicity laughs, and it comes out in a broken choke as she remembers her little girl. "She was this beautiful girl that was evidence we make it together. It was easier when she was here, *seeing* her, *knowing*… And I just… I ran because I lost her, but…" She feels exposed. The words keep getting stuck in her throat, and each breath, each movement razes against her like she's one giant exposed nerve. "I was also scared that everything that had happened wasn't real, too. That it was because of her, that things would go back to the way they were, and I couldn't do that, I just…" Felicity looks away from, pinching her lips together. Her voice is small as she finishes, "It was easier to run first before you left me."

"Felicity…"

"I didn't want to lose you, too, Oliver," she whispers, the words coming out in tiny spurts. "And so… So I did that exact thing to you,

and I'm so sorry, Oliver, I'm…"

"Hey, no, stop, okay? *Stop*." He presses his thumb over her lips gently and she looks up at him. "It's okay."

"No, it's not," she argues.

"Okay, fine," he says, shaking his head in an exasperation that is entirely borne of exhaustion. The fine lines of his face are deeper, lined with a bone-deep tired that emphasize the circles under his eyes. "But it *will* be; we will be."

"You can't know that," she continues stubbornly. "We don't know…"

"You're right," he interrupts, raising his voice over hers. The abrupt way he says it has the rest of her words fading. "I don't know it, just like you don't. But if there is one thing that you've taught me over the last few years, Felicity - not just this last month - it's that you have to have hope. The second I landed on that island, I lost that. Everything - *everything* - that has happened since has left me feeling more and more hopeless… until I met you. You give me hope, Felicity," he says, the force of his words ringing in his voice. He grips her tighter, staring into her eyes. "You make me want to have hope, to look into the future and know that it isn't all death and darkness and pain. You're the reason I didn't want to disappear after Ellie… after she left. A couple of months ago, that's exactly what I would have done. But I didn't. Because of you. You give me *hope* and faith in both of us. I look forward now and I see… I see *us*. Our future. And I have, ever since Ellie came into our lives. But it wasn't because of her. She played a part, yes, a huge part. But it was *you*. It was that first night when we kissed… the next morning in the pillow castle… that night in the gym. Our last first date."

Felicity lets out a wet laugh, sniffling.

"*You* give me that. Ellie might have gotten us started. Really, she just gave us a reason to go a little bit quicker. But the rest of it… That was all us. Our choice. *That* is what gives me hope that we can make this work. That we *will*. I just…"

He pauses. He drinks her in, his eyes dancing over her face, his thumb running over her cheek, her nose, the corner of her mouth.

"I just need you…" Vulnerability colors his face. "Let me have the chance to give *you* hope, Felicity."

Warmth floods her chest.

Her heart feels so big, so very big and *open*.

Felicity whispers, "Oliver," before she surges forward, wrapping her arms around his neck. He meets her halfway, winding his arms around her waist, burying his face in the crook of her neck. He presses soft kisses against her as she turns her face into his throat, saying, "You do. You do, Oliver, you already do." He holds her tighter. "I'm sorry I made you think you don't. You…" She laughs slightly. "You have, ever since you walked into my cubicle that day."

"I'll never forget that day, " he says. "My entire life changed."

That hits her *hard* and she holds him tighter. Her life had changed, too; it'd instantly become more exciting, more invigorating. Looking back, she can pinpoint all the tiny moments where Oliver had impacted her life. It wasn't just when he showed up, out of the blue. It was also when she was left to wonder, to think about the mystery that was Oliver Queen.

"I never saw you coming," she whispers.

"Neither did I," he replies. "The second I saw you, the second I heard your voice… it was like something clicked into place. There was something about you…"

Her heart will probably flutter like that for the rest of her life whenever he says those words.

Felicity laughs under her breath, pressing her face further into his neck. His skin is warm, echoing the comfort and security of his embrace. "I was chewing on a pen."

"It was red."

Her heart stops.

"Yeah," she says a little breathlessly. "I can't believe you remember that."

"I will never forget anything about that moment. Or any other moment we've spent together… or any moment we'll spend together in the future." He pulls back, pressing his forehead to hers. "*Our* future."

"I love you," she says, pushing up onto her toes to get closer. Her lips

brush against his. "So much."

"I love you, too," he breathes.

Felicity isn't sure how long they stand there. It doesn't feel like it's long enough, however long it is. They kiss, briefly, softly, but mostly they hold each other. It isn't the wild desperation of a few minutes ago, and despite the fact that it'd been so prevalent, it doesn't come back. That aching need is replaced with something far deeper, something that resonates in the depths of her soul. This is about reassurance, affirmation… about *being* together. There's so much more to talk about, so much they need to figure out, to discuss, but for right now, this is enough.

And when she thinks, '*We have time,'* she knows it's true.

For the first time in days, Felicity finally acknowledges how *tired* she is.

She must say it out loud because Oliver lets her go, his hand dragging down her arm to tangle their fingers together.

"Should we go lay down?" he asks, kissing her forehead. She leans into his lips, nodding against him.

Before they go, though, Felicity looks up at him. She cups his cheek, staring into his eyes. "Thank you."

"For what?" he whispers.

"For coming to get me," she says. "For being here. For being you."

Oliver smiles, and it reaches his eyes. "Thank you for coming back to me."

"Always." She rolls her eyes slightly. "I might get in my own way - which is sort of hilarious and not-all-that-funny considering how many times I've said that to you since I met you… Okay, that I wanted to say to you…" His lips quirk, warmth and love radiating from his eyes. "But I'll always come back."

"And so will I."

The words carry far more meaning than the point she's making, and they both know it. Felicity nods, acknowledging it… *accepting* it as truth. She doesn't need to run anymore, just like he doesn't need to. If

the significance of this moment wasn't so heavy, she would point out that she's kind of proud he's ahead of her on this learning curve.

"C'mon," he says, tugging on her hand. "Let's go lay down for a bit."

Felicity nods and turns, never letting go of his hand as she pulls him to her bedroom.

He follows her, matching her step-for-step, and it occurs to her that he's never been inside her bedroom. He's been to her apartment before, a few times. He's barely stepped into the living room, though, when he was here, much less down the hallway and all the way to her room.

Normally, she'd probably blush, as if they haven't done a hundred and one things to each other in a dozen places over the last month, but she doesn't have the energy. Instead she tightens her fingers around his as they enter.

The bed is still made from the last time she'd been here, weeks ago. Felicity moves around the bed, tugging the comforter down, pushing the throw pillows - the only reason she ever made the bed, really - to the floor. She glances back long enough to see Oliver unbuttoning his flannel as his eyes dance over her room.

It's a stark contrast to the Queen Manor. Felicity follows his gaze, trying to see it as he would for the first time. If she's being honest with herself, Ellie had brought all the color and life to his room that had been missing before. Save for the sticky notes she'd found on his desk a few weeks ago, all the color there was from Ellie.

The strangest sense of pride slices through her and Felicity presses her lips together to keep her emotions at bay.

"What is it?" Oliver asks softly.

"Hmm?" Felicity looks back to him to find he's stripped down to a white t-shirt and his boxer briefs. "Oh, just… thinking about your room."

He smiles at that before he climbs onto the bed, not waiting for an invitation.

The intimacy of that familiarity strikes Felicity and she finds herself crawling after him, like a moth to the flame. He opens his arms to her and she doesn't waste a single second, wrapping herself around him in

the center of the bed. Oliver falls back against the pillow, using his foot to pull the comforter up just enough to grab it and wrap it around them securely.

It's not cold outside, not even close. Spring is starting to pull out of Starling City, making way for Summer. A warm breeze from the window she never closed has both cleaned and warmed the air in her apartment, but there's still a chill inside her. Oliver must feel the same because he snuggles against her, wrapping himself around her as much as she is him. She presses a leg between his as he hooks his foot over hers.

Felicity pushes her face into his chest, taking a deep breath. It's all him. The lingering scent that was uniquely Ellie's is gone, washed away. Tears burn her eyes and she squeezes her eyes tightly to keep them from falling.

"What about it?" Oliver asks, kissing her temple before scooting down just enough so he's face-to-face with her. He brushes her hair off her face, readjusting her glasses where they'd been sitting slightly crooked.

"I was thinking…" Her voice cracks and she swallows it down. "I was thinking about how much life Ellie brought to it. You have to admit that it wasn't the most inviting space before."

Oliver chuckles at that, rubbing her back. "No. No, it wasn't."

"Is, uh… is her stuff still there?"

His hand freezes.

"No." Felicity bites her lip hard, closing her eyes. "There's some stuff that I… Raisa helped me put it all away. It's packed up somewhere, it's still all there, but I couldn't… I thought it was better to put it away." His voice dips, becoming barely audible. "I wanted to keep it out. I wanted to keep it exactly how she left it. There were toys everywhere," he says with a smile, shaking his head, "but I didn't… It felt too much like she was really *gone*. And she's not. She's home. So… No."

"That's… that was a good idea," Felicity whispers. She slides her hand up from where it was curled against his chest, up to his neck. Her fingers scrape over his beard. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"To be honest," Oliver says with a wry smile, "I don't think I would

have been able to put it all away with you there. I was so overwhelmed as it was. I couldn't even sleep in the bed that first night. I slept in her pillow castle."

"You did?" she asks, her voice full of tears.

Oliver nods. "You weren't there and… God, the thought of sleeping there without you that first night was too much. Because Ellie wasn't there and you weren't there. There wouldn't be another cocoon with her and…" His voice breaks as tears fill his eyes. "I couldn't do it alone. So I slept in the castle."

Felicity hugs him close, pushing her forehead to his. "Oliver…" His shoulders shake at the sound of his name and when he shifts, pressing himself closer, his tears fall on her cheek. "Oh, Oliver…"

"I miss her," he whispers. His voice is heart-wrenching and she holds him tighter. A sob wrenches from deep in his chest, so guttural and broken she knows he's been living in a little bit of denial himself. Or maybe he just needed her, someone who understood how deep the wound goes, before he allowed himself to break. Oliver pushes closer, so hard that it hurts, but she doesn't stop him. "I miss her, Felicity."

"Me, too," she says. "Me, too."

"We barely had her for a month, but… but for that month, she was ours," he continues, the words coming out in a fervent whisper like he's been burying them. "She was our daughter. And she was perfect. God, she was so perfect."

All Felicity can do is nod as her breath hitches with a sob.

"I keep seeing her," he says. "Flashes out of the corner of my eye, or I hear a whisper of her voice. So clearly that it's like she's right there. I *swear* she's right there. I don't know if I'm going crazy or if I'm trying to make sure I never forget her, but God, sometimes it's more than I can handle, and all I want to do is just…"

Felicity tries to hug him even closer, but he's as close as he can get. It pisses her off a little because she wants to do more - she *needs* to do more. Oliver curls into her, burrowing his head into her chest. Felicity presses her face into his hair, kissing the crown of his head.

"I just want to hold her again, for one second, and what makes it worse is that I know I can't, that I *shouldn't*. She's where she should be and I know that." His words are muffled against her breast, his breath

hot. "But I want it, Felicity, I want it so badly that I can *feel* her, like she's right here…"

His words fade into a sob that quickly morphs into another, and another, until he's crying. Pain and grief wrack his body as he sobs, holding onto her for dear life.

Felicity cradles him in her arms, whispering, "Shh… shh…" over and over, because it's all she can do. And maybe this is all he needs right now. Just to be held. To fall apart and know she's there to catch him, to make sure he doesn't drown in it.

He did it for her, before, and she'd taken away his ability to do it when she'd run.

But she's here now, and she's going to stay here, for as long as he needs her.

It's a long while before they fall asleep. Even then, it's mostly from sheer exhaustion.

Felicity doesn't remember when it happened, or who fell asleep first, but when she opens her eyes several hours later, the room is bathed in darkness. Oliver's head is pillowed on her chest, his arm draped over her hips. His breathing is slow and even, the opposite of the quick, stuttered gasps he'd dissolved into when he'd run out of energy. His tears might have stopped, but his grief hadn't, and they'd stayed up, just holding each other until much-needed sleep had taken over.

Felicity blinks at the ceiling in a groggy daze, trying to orient herself, to wake up a bit more, but the only thing she can pay attention to is her bladder.

With a tiny groan, she shifts under Oliver's heavy weight. He doesn't budge, still sound asleep, and she wishes she didn't have to move. The way he's sleeping on her, it's so reminiscent of how he'd turned to her for comfort last night. Ignoring her body's insistence for a moment, she wraps her arms around him, kissing the top of his head, breathing him in. He's a mixture of his shampoo and her bed sheets.

It's not exactly the same scent she'd come to associate with *home* over the last month, because one key element is missing. She gets the same feeling, though - love and security wash through her, filling her with warmth and hope.

He's her home, and nothing can change that.

She doesn't want to move, but she really needs to get up. Felicity shifts again, trying to slide out from underneath him, but he just adjusts with her, only settling once more when she does. It makes her smile, despite herself. Pushing one hand into his hair, she scrapes his scalp with her fingernails while her other comes up and strokes the side of his face. His skin is hot, probably because they'd spent their time cocooned in a giant comforter that is the opposite of summer-friendly.

Oliver shifts, not waking, his hand moving up, slipping under her shirt.

Felicity's breath catches as his fingers graze over her bare abdomen, and then her ribs. There isn't any intent behind his touch, she knows that - he's still asleep - but her body reacts all the same. Goosebumps erupt across the surface of her skin, making her shiver as he keeps moving up. His fingertips barely brush against the underside of her breast and she gasps.

Her nipples instantly harden, pressing up against her thin t-shirt. They're *sensitive*, so much more than she remembers them ever being. She's not sure if it's because she hasn't felt his touch in so long or if it's the pregnancy - or both - but the sensation makes her shudder, which only makes them tingle.

God, she *really* doesn't want to move.

But that choice is taken away from her when her bladder makes itself known again.

Felicity moves slowly, trying not to wake him up, before slipping out from underneath him. His hand gets caught in her shirt and she slowly untangles it before rolling out of bed and padding to the bathroom. With each step she takes, the more lethargic she gets. Despite the several hours of rest she just got, she's exhausted. She's nowhere near caught up on the last few days' lack of sleep, but she does feel better. She feels *rejuvenated*, and she knows it's because Oliver was here with her.

There's something about his presence that gives her permission to let go, to *feel*…

It's something she wasn't capable of before.

She'd almost lost everything, she'd almost *broken* them, but these few days to herself... she'd needed them. To be numb, to know what it would be like without Oliver *or* Ellie. She'd needed it so she could

appreciate what it was like having him back in her arms again.

For the first time in days, the thought of Ellie doesn't make her chest feel like it's being cracked open. It still hurts, a lot, but it doesn't make her lungs seize, it doesn't make her stop breathing, and she doesn't want to curl up and wait for the pain to subside. It hasn't lessened, by any means, but it is a little bit better.

A little more manageable.

It's a sign that things can and will get better.

And it's all because of the man curled up in her bed out there.

Felicity takes her glasses off and washes her hands before splashing water over her face. It does nothing to wake her any further, not that she wants it to. No, she very much so looks forward to going back out there and crawling back into bed, back into Oliver's arms, and falling back to sleep.

Drying her face, she glances in the mirror - she's a little blurry, without her glasses. She sees a wild head of hair, something that Ellie unfortunately inherited from her, and a lopsided shirt, and her face… The blank slate she'd been ever since Ellie had left is gone, and in its place is Felicity Smoak, someone who discovered an entire life of love and hope and possibility within the last several weeks.

She turns the light off and steps back into the bedroom.

Felicity freezes at the sight that waits for her, more out of surprise than anything.

Oliver sits slouched on the bed, a dark shadow. She blinks a few times, waiting for her eyes to readjust. It takes forever though, and she whispers, "Oliver?" as she makes her way back to bed. But when she gets closer, when she sees what he holds in his hands, she stops again, for an entirely different reason.

The elephant is in his hands.

She hadn't even known he was awake, much less that he'd gotten up and gone all the way out into the living room to fetch the stuffed animal where she'd left it. It's deceivingly tiny in his hands, a huge contrast to when Ellie had been holding it when she'd first discovered them, to when she'd come running up to Felicity, one tucked under each arm.

There's a picture of it on her phone, she suddenly remembers. There's a lot of pictures on her phone, ones she hasn't let herself think about. And she'd never looked at the frame that Digg and Lyla had brought over, either. Felicity could never forget what her daughter looks like, not ever, but for a split second, her mind comes up blank and panic stabs her in the chest.

There are still pieces of her here, Felicity realizes, in photos and in their memories, in the elephant Oliver holds. She'd just been ignoring them.

But not anymore. She doesn't want to anymore.

She wants to *remember*.

Felicity watches him run his fingers over its head. He smooths its ears down much the same way she'd been doing. She watches him stare at the elephant, unwilling to interrupt the moment. She wants to go to him, but if it's anything like what she felt over the last few days… she knows he needs this, this quiet moment with a piece of their daughter.

Oliver's breath catches, and she can hear the tears in his voice, but she doesn't get the chance to move to him before he's sitting up straighter. He takes a deep breath, scrubbing his face. Her chest aches with amazement that he's so *open* with his feelings, that he doesn't care that she's right there, watching him as he grieves. God, she loves this man. So much.

He leans over and sets the stuffed animal down on the nightstand. Close and within reach. And then, without a word, he turns to her, a silent invitation to come back to bed. Felicity nods, barely, but it's enough for him to see and he starts pushing himself back in bed, making room for her, but she stops him with a soft, "Oliver…" as she closes the distance between them.

He looks at her wordlessly and she holds her hand out. He takes it without hesitation and she pulls him back until he's sitting on the edge of the bed. Felicity steps between his legs and cups his face. She kisses him softly, a gentle press of her lips to his, to show him he's not alone anymore. That she's there.

Always.

The moonlight shining through the window is muted, barely there, but it's enough for her to see the strict lines of his face, the shadow his stubble creates, the strained lines that are a telltale sign of his biting

back the urge to cry. She runs her thumbs over his cheeks as his hands find her waist, pulling her in closer. He shifts until he's at the very edge of the bed, until she's flush against his hard body.

He's so beautiful, every inch of him. He looks up at her, and even in the darkness she knows he's baring his soul to her. She hopes he can see she's doing the same… and maybe he can because the energy between them slowly shifts, the air growing thicker with an awareness that is unique to only them.

"*Felicity*." His voice is a grated whisper from sleep and the hours spent crying… and from something else. Felicity shivers, and when her fingers start trembling, she holds him tighter. Oliver runs his hands up her back, barely brushing over her, but the heat is there. His palms are so warm through her shirt and she arches her back, pressing her chest into his. They both hiss when her hard nipples brush against his collarbone, his fingers digging into her slightly. "Felicity…"

His breath dances over her skin, their lips brushing together.

It's tentative, whatever is blossoming between them. It's different, nothing like the wild passion that had overcome them yesterday, but also not quite like anything else she's felt with him before.

"Oliver," she gasps, pushing her hands into his hair.

He wraps his arms around her, pulling her closer. She feels his hardening erection against her legs, and she clenches her thighs together, *tightly*, making her suddenly vividly aware of the throbbing between her own legs. She moans, fisting his hair lightly. He slips one hand down her back, over her backside. He grips her lightly, his other hand slipping up to the back of her neck so she's positively fused to him.

"Make love to me," she whispers, her voice cracking. The words tumble out without a single thought, lost in the sensation that is this wonderful man touching her with such reverence. Such *love*. Tears burn her eyes as he nods, almost frantically, his lips falling on her cheek and then down, following the delicate line of her jaw. Felicity dips her head, kissing his cheekbone and then his nose, his forehead, everywhere she can, her breathy pleas filling the air, "Please… love me… love me…"

With a breathless gasp of her name, Oliver's hand cups the back of her head and he pulls her face to his, his lips slanting over hers.

It's *perfect.*

It's fire and passion, love and hope, warmth and tenderness, ferocity and heat. It starts out simple and easy, but it quickly grows, their hands grasping at the other, urging the other as close as possible until there's nothing left but *them*. Felicity kisses him with everything she has, pouring all of herself into it, and he meets her every step of the way. It's what these last few days have been as much as it's recognition of the month they'd shared. Oliver presses himself closer, angling his head to go deeper. Their tongues tangle together, their whimpers and moans growing louder with each passing second.

It's love and grief, pain and healing…

It's *everything.*

It's *them.*

Oliver slides his hands down her back, over her ass and to her thighs. He tugs her closer, lifting her legs so she can straddle him. Felicity tries to pull her knees up, to do just that, but her body was still trying to wake up a few minutes ago and now it's under an onslaught she wouldn't want to stop even if she could. When she stumbles against him, their lips never parting, Oliver lets out a barely audible growl and suddenly grips her legs, lifting her up off the floor.

Felicity gasps into his mouth, grabbing his shoulders for balance as he pulls her into his lap. She slides closer, sinking against him, moaning when the hardness in his boxer-briefs presses right up against her. He shudders under her touch, pressing his hand to her lower back, pulling her even closer as he thrusts up just enough to create the most beautiful friction.

It's too much and she has to pull back, letting out a low uneven keen as she rotates her hips, meeting his thrusts. God, it's so much better than earlier, than anything, although she isn't sure how that's possible… But it is. And she wants more, so much more. She needs it, just as badly as he does.

Oliver pulls her face back to his, kissing her again as they move together. He pushes his hands up under her shirt, pushing it all the way up until they have to pull back to get rid of it. He's barely dropped it on the floor when he wraps his arms around her again, leaning her back to take one of her nipples into his mouth.

"Ooh *God*," Felicity gasps, her jaw dropping.

His tongue swirls around the hard nub, sending sensation raining through her. It's so much more potent than she remembers and it has heat streaking through her, straight to her core. Oliver holds her up as she undulates against him, her hips moving in jerky motions, catching just enough friction to fuel the desire he so easily raises in her. She holds his hair as he switches to her neglected breast. The combination of his mouth and the cool air on her other wet nipple has her digging her nails into his scalp, holding him even closer to her.

"Oliver… Oliver… don't stop…"

"Never," he whispers, pulling her back up to him, his lips finding hers again.

They kiss like they haven't touched in *years*. They're both insatiable, not getting enough, needing more, so much more. Their hips move together, creating a beautiful, deep pleasure that she feels building inside her… but it's on the cusp. Not quite within reach… so close, but so far away.

"I need you," Oliver whispers between kisses. "Felicity…"

"Yes…"

Without warning, he stands, grasping her tight to his chest, and spins, setting her gently on the bed. The sheets are cool against her back, and they make her nipples even harder where they brush against his t-shirt-clad chest. With urgent movements, Felicity tugs the fabric up, pulling it over his head. The second he's free of it, Oliver's fingers hook in the bands of her pants and he tugs them down. He steps back, a stunning picture of tender power and strength in the moonlight as he takes her pants with him, pulling them off her legs one by one before dropping them to the ground. Her panties are next, slipping off with ease and then he's on her again.

Felicity spreads her legs, opening herself to him, as much with her body as with her heart and soul. And he takes it, saying her name with such devotion that it rattles her to her very core before his lips cover hers. She can *feel* his love for her and it's so wonderful, so intensely perfect that tears burn her eyes.

"I love you," she moans. "I love you…"

"Yes… Felicity…"

Their lips crash together, swallowing the tiny sounds each of them

make as he blankets her, covering her with his body, with his love. She pulls her legs up, cradling him close, holding him securely, almost protectively.

His erection strains through his boxer-briefs, pressing to her core with urgency. Her wetness soaks through them, making him whimper for her as he thrusts. She runs her hands over his thickly muscled back, caressing his scars with a devotion that leaves him trembling, before she slips them down his spine. She drags her nails lightly over the large burn scar on his lower back before she reaches the band of his underwear.

"Oliver…" She pushes them down, but she doesn't have the leverage to get them off. "Please…"

With a harried nod, Oliver pushes himself off of her and strips them off, leaving him beautifully naked before her. In more ways than one.

Felicity sits up, grabbing his hand, pulling him back to the bed. He can't stop touching her, just as much as she can't stop touching him while he moves to crawl back on top. She shakes her head with a soft, "C'mere," before tugging him down beside her. He falls onto his back and he scoots up until he's in the center of the bed. His hands never leave her, pulling her with him, and she follows.

Her lips brush against his as she straddles him.

His hardness brushes against her wet heat, making them both shudder. The sensation has Felicity sitting up, her head falling back with a gasp, her hips pressing down for *more*. Oliver hisses her name, staring up at her with hooded eyes, his hands circling her waist. Her eyes find his again and she shifts backwards, dragging the evidence of her arousal along his thick length. His hips jerk up with a gasp, his fingers digging into her as she reaches between them, gripping him tight.

Felicity lifts herself up, positioning him at her entrance, and thrusts down.

He lets out a sharp gasp, his back arching to thrust his hips closer to hers. It echoes her low moan as he fills her, as she takes him in as deep as she can. He slides in with ease and when she lifts up a little, just enough to spread her wetness over him, they thrust together at the same time, finally coming home.

It's *everything*.

She braces herself on his chest, starting a slow rocking motion, but it's not enough for Oliver. He grabs her arms, causing her to lose her leverage and fall down against him. He wraps his arms around her, anchoring her to him as he plants his feet on the mattress, thrusting up into her.

Their movements are so very easy, so very soft as they make love to each other.

She wraps her arms around his head, moaning as she drops soft kisses over his cheek and jaw before she finds his lips.

"Felicity," he whispers against her mouth. He captures her bottom lip between his, and it sends razorsharp need coursing through her, fueling their tiny thrusts. Keeping one hand wrapped around her back, Oliver brushes her hair from her face with the other, so he can see her in the growing moonlight. His eyes are startlingly blue as he locks her gaze with his, everything he's feeling shining back at her. It's beautiful - *he's* beautiful - so much so that it takes her breath away. "I love you."

"I love you," she says, cupping his face in her hands. She kisses him, *showing* him, whispering it again, over and over. The words echo each of his thrusts, each time he fills her, each time he comes home to her.

Their pleasure gradually starts building. Their cries grow louder, barely muffled by their lips. They don't go faster, unwilling to break the gentle motions, but they don't need to. Their love for each other surrounds them, buffers them, carries them. It's in every touch, every gasp, every whispered word of love. It's what has her core gradually tightening, starting to burn with a pleasure that is white hot, that starts to spiral out from her center. It moves through her like lava, burning hotter, stoked higher with each thrust, each brush of his hand over her damp back. Each kiss elevates it, each breathy whimper has her climbing higher, a gentle tremor translating over the surface of her skin. It sets her nerves on edge, in preparation…

"Hold on," Oliver whispers against her lips, breaking through her pleasurable haze. She doesn't get the chance to ask him for what when he's suddenly sitting up, taking her with him. His muscles contract deliciously underneath her, making her inner walls clamp around him, which has him groaning a low curse as he wraps his arms around her, cradling her in his lap.

Felicity settles against him, forcing him even deeper inside her.

God, it's all she needs, that right there. He fills her so completely, so

perfectly, and she can't do anything but hold on as the new angle suddenly sends her closer to the edge. Pleasure radiates through her, but it's just the beginning.

Oliver wraps her up tightly in his arms as she moves on top of him, her legs winding around his waist. He's so deep that it takes her breath away, leaves nothing but *feeling*.

"Oh my god," she gasps, holding onto him for dear life.

She thrusts against him, her hips moving of their own volition, knowing exactly what to do, what she needs. And it's what he needs, too. He clings to her, digging his face into her neck before pulling back. He drags his nose up her throat, over her pulse point and jaw, his lips quick to follow before he finds her lips again.

The kiss is simple, chaste. Neither of them move, lingering, unwilling to break apart for even a second.

It doesn't take long.

They rock together, the angle absolutely perfect as they hold each other. She moves her hips, somehow finding the right amount of friction against her clit, just enough to push her up… up… and over.

Felicity comes with a broken gasp, her body jerking against his. The orgasm bursts inside her, unlike anything she's ever felt before. It isn't a violent explosion of pleasure; it's *more*. It's all-consuming, taking over everything, burning through her, cleansing her. She feels it in every inch of her body; the soles of her feet tingle as heat rushes up over her neck and face.

Oliver is right behind her. He grasps the back of her neck, keeping her close, breathing in her desperate satisfied cries as he rocks into her. He lets out a short, sharp sob, his arms tightening around her so hard it hurts. It's quickly followed by another as he moves against her in uneven thrusts before he stiffens. He shakes, his voice cracking, his hands falling to her hips, yanking her as close as he can, pushing himself inside her as far as he can go…

And then he comes, with a loud groan of her name. He fills her, his fingers digging into her hips as tight as she holds him, his hips moving in tiny little thrusts until he's spent. He falls against her, his chest heaving as he gasps for air.

Blood rushes through Felicity's ears, her heart pounding. His is going

just as fast; she feels it where their chests are sealed together. As if there's any way they can get closer, they hug each other. Fingers run over backs and shoulders. His dip down to her hip, running over her thigh before moving back up as she touches his chest and shoulders, his arms, his large back.

Neither move, neither willing to even try because they're home.

They're finally home.

Felicity cups his face and kisses him. It's soft and languid, spent… and *content*.

They don't need words, it's all communicated in their touch, in the way they hold the other.

Exhaustion finally catches up with them.

Oliver helps her as she lifts herself up. They both make discontented noises when he slips out of her, and they don't let go of each other as they fall back into the pillows. They wrap around each other, as tightly and as close as they can. She cradles him in her arms again and he touches every inch of her that he can reach. He takes extra care to caress her stomach, and she can feel the smile on his lips, thinking about the new life growing in her.

Their child.

Felicity knows with every fiber of her being that she will love this baby just as much as she loves Ellie. She knows it just as much as she knows that they will see her again, see *their* Ellie. September third is emblazoned in her mind. She'd made him promise that no matter what happens, they make sure to come back together on that day…

It wasn't necessary. Because he'll be there, just as much as she is.

They will see Ellie again. Their Ellie.

Sleep slowly pulls them under once more.

Things aren't perfect, but they aren't meant to be, she thinks as they kiss each other lazily, content to just *be*. The important thing is that they're together, that while their hardships aren't over in the least, they will face them and they will come out on the other side. They might be a little worse for the wear, but they'll be in one piece.

Because they'll be together.

Forever.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

When we began this story 13 months ago, we honestly thought it wouldn't be well received. Time travel AND a kid fic, we said? That meant a limited audience for sure. We also thought it would be between 35k-50k. Shows what we knew, huh? For both of us, this has been an experience that ironically defies description. We've both learned and grown so much in this past year and it is simultaneously gutting and satisfying to put the final period on this story.

We would not be here without a few people, so bear with us while we get this out please? Thanks. First of all, Rachel and Deej... this began as a submission for OFBB 2015. You gave us a reason to start and we thank you hugely for that. To the anon whose prompt kicked this off, you gave us the first threads of a plot and we are so grateful. To Lizzie and Jaimie, we owe you tremendously for your quiet, consistent contributions as sounding boards and betas. You are both, quite simply, the best. And, to you... our readers. Because, my God, you have surprised us in the best possible ways. We've gotten to know a lot of you through this and we are incredibly grateful for your unwavering support in the telling of a story that's honestly just shy from hitting the length of War and Peace. You've motivated us, kept us honest and kept us engaged. Thank you.

This is the end of this particular story, but it's not the end of our characters' story or our writing partnership. We have a tremendous amount more to tell. For the time being, our individual focuses are shifting back to our older works in progress, but we'll be posting one-shots in this universe as we do so (in "Pieces of Always"). And, after finishing our ongoing projects, we have plans for three more multichapter sequels to this story. If you're interested, we'd suggest subscribing to the series.

But for now, there is this... the last of FiCoN. We hope you have enjoyed this journey even a fraction as much as we have because, for us, the experience has been - quite frankly - composed of the most incredible moments.

All our love and gratitude,

Janis and Bre

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometime in the not-so-distant future…

"I cannot even begin to tell you how stupid this is."

Oliver has to bite the inside of his lip to keep from smiling. He manages to keep it at bay, scanning the surrounding alley instead, as his very beautiful and *very* pregnant wife walks next to him.

Walk is a relative term. It's more like a waddle, these days, though he absolutely knows better than to tell her that.

"This is next-level-stupidity, *Arrow*," Felicity hisses. "You should not be out here and you should definitely, *definitely* not be out here with me." Despite her insistent words to the contrary, she doesn't let go of her death grip on his hand. When he uses his bow to indicate a puddle she's about to step into, her hand only tightens as she shuffles around the water. "What if someone sees us?"

"I'm wearing my mask, honey."

"Well, I'm not!" she retorts, waving at her face with expressive tangerine-painted nails. Her very *obscured* face. The burst of orange on her fingertips and a stray lock of blond hair are the only identifiers that make it out of the shadows. Oliver can't stop the grin that pulls at his lips at the sight of her in his grey zip-up sweatshirt. It's worn, well-used and starting to thin along the hem and elbows. She'd commandeered it as her own long ago. And, even though she's now well into her ninth month, the sweatshirt still hangs on her. The sleeves are bunched up over her arms, continually sliding down, and the hood is tugged low over her face - the very gorgeous face she's still waving at. He can't see her without ducking down to look beneath the cowl. When he does just that, trying to get a little chuckle out of her, it backfires. She points at his face with a dangerous jab of her finger. "And you *know* I mean a body mask, because nobody needs to see my face to figure out who I am at the moment, Oli… *Arrow*."

She growls at her almost-slip.

"I'm just escorting a lovely pregnant woman to safety," Oliver replies, unable to keep a cheeky grin off his face. "That's all."

"I'll show you just how *lovely* I can be, buster."

He chuckles.

"We're almost there," Oliver promises, pressing his gloved fingers into her lower back. How she's even standing after the night they've had is a testament to the strength that flows through her veins, the very same strength that will be so readily evident in their daughter when she arrives.

Soon. Their daughter is almost here and *he cannot wait*.

The doctors swear that Felicity's due date isn't for nearly another three weeks, but they both know there's no way she'll make it that long. He's so very grateful for that because he's not sure he could make it that long either. And, based on the colorful curse words that have been flying wildly from his wife's mouth over the last month, she definitely can't wait either.

"*I already love our daughter more than anything in the world, but, Oliver, if she doesn't get out of me soon, I'm not just going to lose my mind, I'm going to have to have it physically scooped out of my head in order to get through these next few weeks."*

"You should've stayed back there," she says as she kicks someone's discarded beer bottle to the side.

Oliver sighs. "I wasn't about to let my almost forty-week pregnant wife go get the van by herself in a really, really questionable part of the Glades."

"John would've come with me," she argues, as if that's any better. Due to some combination of her last trimester of pregnancy and irritation at their current predicament, her tolerance level is slipping lower and lower with each passing second, which in turn makes her grouch level rise. Not that he'd ever tell her, but he's learned to navigate said grouchiness pretty well. He treasures his life way too much to risk her wrath. "Everyone knows the Arrow. How many explosively pregnant women do you think there are in this city? I'm not exactly low-profile. It's pretty well-known that your…" Her voice lowers as she speaks through gritted teeth, "*Alter ego* also has a very near-to-term wife. The dots are going to connect for someone. Honestly, I knew you were lying five seconds after I met you. I'm bright, but I'm not the only genius in this ci-"

Without warning, Oliver interrupts her with a hushed, "*Felicity*."

He stops, pulling her into the shadows, not bothering to glance around

- he knows they're alone - as he slips his hand under the hood, finding her cheek.

"Thank you," he whispers.

That takes her completely off guard. "For what?"

He smiles, stroking her cheek with his thumb. He leans forward, kissing her forehead - what he assumes is her forehead - through the sweatshirt. She lets out another huff of annoyance before reaching up and tugging the hood back just enough to see him. A streetlamp a couple dozen feet away catches the edge of her glasses as her gaze meets his.

She positively *glows*. She's a beacon of life and vitality, a bright spot in this alleyway of grime. Her cheeks are still flushed from the adrenaline rush earlier, warm even through his gloves from the exertion of the hike back to the van. He hates how far they had to park away from the warehouse, for two reasons: her computers couldn't tap into what she needed in the building from the van's relative safety, and they couldn't just pull the van around to keep her off her feet, something she had choice words about.

"*These guys just had to choose an alley literally littered with dumpsters. And yes, I do realize I'm complaining about the litter-filled things littering the alleyway! The point still stands!"*

God, he loves this woman.

"We couldn't have done this without you," Oliver says.

It's a huge admission, and his voice reflects that. Because he'd been one hundred percent against her even going into the bunker, much less *on the mission.* Especially when she'd gotten a light contraction earlier that morning, and even more when it'd happened again during their argument about her *not* going. He was honestly afraid to ask if she'd had any more while she'd been dismantling the computer that had almost stripped half the city's money. His mother would have *killed* him if that had happened, and it would have been pretty bad for the city.

So yeah, there definitely hadn't been a margin of error and he absolutely could not have done this without his brilliant wife's expertise.

Felicity snorts. "No, you couldn't have," she agrees. Oliver laughs and

she pokes him in the chest, opening her mouth to continue before changing her mind. Her face softens, partly from absolute exhaustion and partly from something much deeper - *love*. And yet, she can't quite help herself. "You know, this could have been done hours ago if you'd just agreed to me coming along in the first place."

"I know."

That earns him the best thing possible: her smile.

It's a solid reminder that she holds him in the palm of her hand.

"Remember that for next time then," Felicity says. "I'm just as awesome pregnant as when I'm not carrying a cannonball in my stomach."

Delight makes his heart feel twenty times bigger. Oliver raises an eyebrow, dropping his hand to brush the side of her stomach. "Next time, huh?"

"I meant next time we have a mission, Oliv… ia… er." She rolls her eyes at herself, and when he grins, she shakes her head. "How about we get this one out first before we start talking about *next time*."

It's not even a question and they both know it. Of *course* there will be a next time, there has to be. Their next child *has* to come into existence, if just because they *know* there's a next time.

"I can't wait," Oliver whispers.

Felicity hums under her breath, shifting closer to him. She plants her hands against his leather-clad chest, raising an eyebrow up at him. Her fingers are swollen, emphasizing the ring on her finger.

"You know what else I can't wait for?" she asks.

"What's that?" he asks. His hand settles on her hip, subtly pulling her further into the shadows. The night had been a success and he's more than content to take a few more minutes with his wife, as long as they keep *some* sort of cover.

"*Practicing* for next time," she whispers, her mouth curling in a knowing smile. A slice of need cuts through him at the look in her eyes. When she licks her lips, his mind jumps straight to other things she's licked in the last few days. She smirks, like she knows exactly what he's thinking. Which she probably does. "I really, *really* miss

practicing, Oliver."

God, so does he.

"Like… the last time we had the van?" she continues, tapping her finger against his chest. "Or in that warehouse, or in the kitchen… the shower…"

"Felicity…"

His body hardens, straining against the very, very tight leather he's wearing. He grips her hip firmly, taking a steadying breath that does absolutely nothing to calm his suddenly racing heart.

Felicity has settled into this pregnancy like a second skin, wearing it proudly. *Flaunting* it, even. She's gorgeous and sexy, and the confidence she carries only emphasizes that, making him want to drop to his knees and worship at her feet for an eternity. He always wants her - *always* - but there's something incredibly erotic about the fact that she's carrying *his* child in her body, a life they created together. It sends his desire for her through the roof.

They haven't had the time they used to, but when they do manage to get a few minutes alone, he makes sure she knows how he feels.

Thoroughly.

"We should stay in tonight," Oliver says. Usually around this time of night, she's asking him to prop her feet up higher on the couch while making sure she has every single piece of technology in the house within arm's reach. All of which he gladly does. But he has to admit that this idea sounds *so much better*. She steps closer - as much as she can with the stomach she's wielding - as he continues in a grittier voice, "We do have the house all to ourselves…"

Felicity grins, biting her bottom lip. It's all innocence until she slips her hand down his chest and grips him through his leather pants. "We do, don't we?"

Oliver's hips jerk forward and he laughs, ducking his head until his forehead touches hers. "You're insatiable."

"Yes," she says, squeezing him, making him swell with a need that definitely *cannot* be taken care of right now. The thought makes him groan and she adds, "I am."

He chuckles, biting the tip of his tongue before reluctantly pulling her hand away. "You were so worried about people seeing us walking down the street. What do you think they'll say when they see something else?"

"I suddenly really don't care," Felicity whispers, which makes him laugh so loudly it echoes down the alleyway. That seems to sober her, because she steps back reluctantly. "Wow, the acoustics in here are kind of amazing." She makes a face. "Alright, I care a little."

"Just a little," he says before giving her a quick, chaste kiss and stepping away. Because if he doesn't, things might spiral and they really don't need that. Tugging her hood back down to cover her face, he grabs her hand, stepping out of the shadows. "C'mon." His hand finds her lower back. It's more habit than anything that has him digging his fingers into her back, trying to soothe the overstrained muscle there. One of the first things he's going to do when she's ready and cleared by the doctors is plant her face-down on the bed and massage every inch of her until she's putty in his hands. His body tightens and he groans under his breath. Yeah, let's think about that *later*. "Let's go before you get me into trouble."

"Ha! Like it's just me." Felicity snorts. "And, so you know, I'm still really peeved that you didn't let John bring me to the van."

He huffs, wrapping his arm around her waist, gripping her hip. "I'm not letting you out of my sight." He leans in closer. "At least until you're naked in bed."

"Priorities, Arrow."

"You are my priority. Always."

She doesn't respond to that, but he does feel her melt slightly under his touch.

As they finally spot the van where it's parked in front of a closed garage, Felicity takes a second to fish out the keys stuck in the pocket on her thigh. The workout pants she's taken to wearing in lieu of her skirts - something she bemoans on a near-daily basis - have proven themselves rather handy; they come with *pockets*, something most of her skirts and dresses seriously lacked.

With a small sound of triumph, Felicity pulls them out and pushes the button to unlock the van.

The parking lights blink…

And that's when Oliver hears it.

The soft scuff of a shoe on the roof directly behind them.

His heart drops and he freezes in his tracks. He turns his head, zeroing in on the sound, but just as quickly as it was there, it's suddenly gone.

When it doesn't come again, he almost dismisses it as nothing…

"What is it?" Felicity asks quietly, her hand coming up to grip his arm.

But then he hears it again, followed by another one on the opposite roof.

"Go," Oliver hisses as instinct takes over. He pushes Felicity towards the van, spinning to cover her as he whips an arrow out of his quiver. "Get to the van," he says, lifting his bow. "*Now.*"

She's already moving, hurrying as fast as she can, but before she can take more than a few steps, three bodies drop from the sky in a blur of darkness.

Two land in front of Oliver and one lands between her and van.

It's not the sound of heavy boots landing on the ground that make his insides curdle with fear, nor is it the whoosh of clothes as their attackers pull out weapons. It's not his own sharp inhale as his training takes over, already shooting an arrow at one of the attacker's legs to incapacitate him or the squeal of tires somewhere in the distance.

No.

It's his wife's startled cry quickly followed by her shoe skidding on the ground as she tries to twist away from the man advancing on her.

It's the gravel giving way under her feet, making her drop to her knees with a loud smack and her growled, "*No!*" as the attacker grabs her arm, yanking her up to her feet.

It's the sound of her struggling as Oliver fights off the other two, and the sound of her back hitting the van where the man throws her against it.

It's the sound of her yelling, "Hey, no. Stop!" when the man moves to

tackle Oliver from behind and the telltale sound of her shoes catching on the broken pavement as she goes after him and the man turns and slams his fist into her face.

That sound that will stick in Oliver's mind for a long, *long* time. He's heard ones like it dozens of times, whether it's his face or someone else's, a bone-crunching wet *thud*. It has his stomach plummeting with a panic that burns through him like lava, because this time it's his *wife*.

"No!" Oliver shouts before Felicity can even hit the ground.

The next twenty seconds are a blur. All he has to see is Felicity slumped over on the ground, her hand on her face and something that looks a lot of like blood on the pale skin of her fingers, to have pure rage take over.

Oliver's damn near animalistic as he charges their attackers, something intensely primal powering him forward. He doesn't care who they are or what they want. He doesn't know why they're coming after him or why they're desperate enough to *punch* a pregnant woman. None of that matters. He'll care later, when they're broken and bloody at his feet and Felicity is safe in his arms.

Maybe.

Some part of him hears her groaning, and a tiny slice of him is placated that she's at least awake, but the rest of him is lit up with fury. Her sobs of pain only fuel the fire.

They. Touched. His. Wife.

Oliver throws one of them into the nearest wall with a sickening crunch and breaks the arm of another, but he isn't done. As that man screams in agony, Oliver cracks his foot into the side of his knee, sending him to the ground.

The last one standing jabs a knife towards him, going for his spine. Oliver's faster, though. The blade does slice him, cutting through the well-worn leather of his jacket and drawing blood, but he doesn't feel it. He punches that man so hard that he hears a nasty crack, but the beefy guy's head merely whips back around before he's back on him. He throws Oliver at a dumpster, sending him into the rusted metal with a bang that echoes throughout the alley.

Oliver manages to sweep him off his feet, but he doesn't get a moment

to breathe as the one who crashed into the wall is back up and tackling him. He drives his shoulder into Oliver's gut, pushing all the air out of his body in a violent gush as they both land in a pile of forgotten garbage.

The one with the broken leg pulls out a gun.

Oliver vaguely hears Felicity shouting something that sounds a lot like curses at herself for not having something to call for help, but he doesn't need help. Not right now.

It takes too long for his tastes, but he finally twists the knife free from one man's grip and uses it to stab the other in the gut, ripping the blade through his innards. The man on the ground raises the gun, but Oliver kicks it out of his grasp before it can go off. He rams his boot into that man's face, sending a spray of blood across the dirty concrete. Oliver turns in time to block a double punch from the last attacker that would have had him seeing stars. They trade bruising punches until a lucky hit from Oliver sends the man careening head-first into a brick wall.

He falls to the ground with a wet splat. He doesn't get back up.

None of the attackers do.

Before Oliver can fully process *anything* that's happening, he's already turning to his wife with a harried, "Fe-" He physically bites his tongue to keep from spilling her whole name. "Are you okay?"

Damn it, this is why he didn't want her out here.

Fear and panic and about a hundred other different gut-twisting emotions rocket through him as he scrambles over to her, dropping to his knees at her side. He hisses when the movement makes his bad knee throb, but he ignores it, cupping her face instead before dropping one hand to her stomach.

"I'm okay," she gasps, but she sounds the exact opposite. Her glasses are uneven and her cheek is already swelling where the thug's fist had landed. It sends another bout of acidic rage surging through his veins. "We're okay."

"You're going to the hospital," Oliver says, his mind already jumping to every single horrible thing that could go wrong. There's so much that could happen from a single punch, especially when you aren't braced for it, and the *baby*… "Oh god, we're going to the hospital.

Now."

"Oliver…"

"Don't argue with me, Felicity," he snaps, his voice echoing down the alleyway. He punches the button on his chest to call for help, something he hadn't even had *time* to do in the blur of the recent attack. "Digg, we…"

"Oliver!"

The desperation in her voice is starkly different from even a second ago and the sound of it makes him freeze.

"I'm not *arguing* with you, you…"

Felicity stops mid-word before gritting her teeth and grasping at her stomach. Her body convulses in a way he recognizes all too well as a short, pained cry falls from her throat.

It takes Oliver a long second to realize her belly's harder than it had been earlier.

His insides suddenly feel like they're made of air.

"Felicity, are…?"

"My water broke," she moans, confirming his suspicion as her head falls back against the van with a sharp bang. She doesn't look like she even feels it as she opens her eyes, finding his. "My water broke all over this disgusting ground, which means that *stupid frakking idiot* made me go into labor. So yes, we're going to the hospital. *Right now*."

"Oh…"

"*Right now, Oliver*! I'm not… I'm not having my baby in the middle of an alley. I will not give birth to our daughter in a freaking alleyway! And I'm definitely, *definitely* not having her without the biggest epidural ever. Do you hear me?"

Diggle's voice echoes in his ear. "Oliver? Hey, man, talk to me, what's going on?"

"Oh… *god*," Felicity groans, squeezing her eyes shut, writhing on the ground.

Oliver hits the comm button so hard he wonders if he's going to have

a bruise on his chest in the morning. It comes to life in his ear and he barks, "Get up here, John. *Now*. We got ambushed and Felicity's going into labor."

"*What*?"

Another contraction hits and he sees the physical toll it takes on her. Felicity shouts out, wrenching herself down around her stomach as it hits her with tremendous force. All of a sudden Oliver isn't so much worried about the fact that she's been pushed into early labor, but rather that it's moving so damn fast.

Terror slams into him.

What if something happens to her?

To the baby?

No. No, he won't let it. He will *never* let anything happen to her.

"Now, John!" Oliver orders before gripping Felicity under the arms. He ignores how much he's shaking, instead concentrating everything on her. "Come on, baby, we gotta get up."

He lifts her effortlessly, something he'll marvel at later because she's absolute dead weight, all her attention on her stomach. There's a large wet spot on the ground underneath her and her clothes are soaked, both with amniotic fluid and from the storm that'd ravaged the city the day before.

Felicity clings to him with one hand, moaning, "Oh my god," as he leans her against the van. He scoots her over, something that almost has her legs giving out, and he has to wrap his arms around her to keep her from keeling over. Mostly because her arms are wound around her stomach. She's panting, a thin layer of sweat already coating her skin, loose pieces of her hair stick to her temples.

"Oliver…"

"We're on our way, honey," he says. "We're going. Now. Right now."

She grits her teeth, nodding rapidly, and Oliver wrenches the back door open just as the sound of feet slapping the ground comes from behind him.

"What happened?" Diggle demands, but before Oliver can so much as

look at him, squealing tires sound in the distance.

They're loud enough to make Felicity look up along with him and Digg, all their eyes flying to the mouth of the alleyway where a car skids into view. It's the opposite end, so there's enough distance, but at the same time it's not nearly enough because his *pregnant wife is in labor*. The passenger side door opens, a pair of men stepping out, and Oliver doesn't have to see the details of their clothes and weapons to know they're part of the gang he'd just handled inside. The very same gang that had been hired to protect the 'care package' Felicity had dismantled and the one that'd tried to ambush them out here.

Either they were paid *a lot* of money, or they took their job way too seriously.

Probably both, as the person gets back in the car and they take off with another squeal of the tires, clearly intent on coming around the obstacle ridden alleyway to meet them.

"Why don't people just hire mercenaries anymore?" Felicity groans, sounding near-delirious with pain as a smaller contraction rockets through her. "At least they have *scruples*. Or at least they wouldn't *punch a pregnant woman*. At least I hope they wouldn't. Right?"

"What?" Digg asks in alarm, but they don't answer.

Instead, Oliver orders, "We have to go."

"Yes," Felicity agrees, nodding. "Yes, yes, yes. Now. I need a hospital. I need Dr. Benzin."

The mention of their doctor almost makes Oliver smile, which is a *feat,* considering. She doesn't talk about the gang members coming for them, or the fact that there are more on top of the fifteen they'd left inside to be found by the police. She doesn't point out that she's going into labor too early and that it's happening way too fast.

No, she's choosing to be more worried about getting to pain medicine and their doctor.

God, he *loves her*.

Oliver helps her into the backseat, quickly climbing in behind her as he says, "I honestly don't care who we have when we get to the hospital as long as our baby's okay."

"Oh, she's going to be okay," Felicity says, a little maniacally. Oliver hears Diggle asking them where the keys are before he spots them where Felicity had dropped them when they'd been attacked. "She's going to be *just fine*, because I say so, Oliver. Okay? I say so!"

The van rocks as Diggle jumps in. Oliver slams the back door shut as the other man shoves the keys into the ignition. The engine's barely turning over before he switches it into drive and takes off in a jolt. The sudden move sends Oliver and Felicity falling over as Diggle takes a corner too sharply.

Another contraction hits her, making her wail.

"Come here," Oliver says, gathering her up into his arms. He twists, shoving his leg behind her and pulling her back so she's resting against his chest. The muscles in her back are taut, rock hard with a combination of tension and pain. "C'mere, hold my hand, honey, hold my hand."

"Oliver…"

A flash of headlights slices through the car as the car starts following them.

"*Breathe*."

"No!" she says, shaking her head. "No, I don't want to breathe, or… or… Just *no*! This… oh my god, I'm in labor, we're having her, this isn't… this isn't how it's supposed to happen, Oliver. It's too early, it's way too early."

"Shh," he whispers, grasping her hands in his. She squeezes his hands so hard it makes his bones feel like they're turning to dust.

"I can't… This is all wrong, isn't it?" Felicity asks, the words frantic. "It has to be! This isn't how it happens, right? This is too early. What if something happens to her, what if…?"

He's already thinking all the same things she is, and actually hearing his fear spoken out loud threatens to push him over the edge.

"Felicity, *easy*," he breathes, pulling her up closer to his chest. He curls around her protectively, his heart breaking when she lets out a gut-wrenching sob. "She's okay, she's *fine*."

"You don't know that," she argues, the words garbled with tears and

pain. "You don't…" A contraction cuts her off, ripping through her body. "*Oh god*!"

"Breathe, breathe…" It's a damned miracle his voice is as calm as it is as Diggle swerves through traffic, cursing under his breath, trying to lose the car following them. He can't think about that right now, he *can't*, and he won't, because he needs to be there for his wife. His amazing, beautiful and *strong* wife who is currently sobbing, shaking her head vehemently. "Felicity, *breathe*…"

It takes a moment of repeating it over and over before she finally starts doing just that. She takes short, stilted breaths that don't seem to give her any oxygen whatsoever, but they do calm her, enough for her to hear him.

"I do know she's okay," Oliver replies, pressing his mouth to her ear so she hears him. Sweat soaks her hair and her body trembles as another contraction threatens to crest inside her, but she *hears him*. "I know she's okay because she's our daughter. She's *your* daughter, and you are the strongest, bravest and most amazing woman I know. She's okay. *She's okay*."

"Do you promise?" Felicity chokes out, her voice cracking.

He can't. He absolutely cannot promise her that, because he doesn't know… but he also *does*. Oliver can't explain it, but as her question echoes in his mind, he somehow finds a blinding certainty that everything will be okay.

He just *knows*.

"I promise, Felicity," Oliver whispers. "I *promise*." She nods and he grips her hands tight in his. "Okay?"

"O-okay," she breathes. She grits her teeth. "Okay."

"I love you," Oliver says, kissing her ear. He drops a kiss to her shoulder, huddling her closer. "I love you so much, Felicity."

"I love yo…" The words morph into a pained cry as yet another contraction hits. Her head flies back, her nails digging into the back of his hands. "Oh god… oh god, oh god, I can't do this here… I need… I need my… my bag, and my mom, and *an epidural*."

"Easy, honey, easy. Just breathe. You need to breathe."

"You try breathing through this, Oliver!" Felicity growls. "You try… breathing…"

A contraction cuts her off again.

"John?" Oliver asks, that single syllable filled with a dozen questions.

"I think I lost them," Digg replies, glancing in the rearview mirror before turning down a street and then making a sharp left that sends them down a wide alleyway. It opens into a busier street, one which he merges onto with ease. Thankfully it's not *too* busy due to the late hour, but… "We're still about twenty minutes out from the hospital, though."

"So drive faster then," Oliver snaps. "I don't know if she has twenty minutes!"

Diggle's already pushing the pedal down, the engine revving as it gains speed. "I am, but…" He glances over his shoulder, and all it takes is one look at Felicity's face for him to make up his mind. "You might have to deliver your kid, Oliver."

His heart leaps into his throat as he gasps, "What?"

"Oh my god," Felicity whimpers, in part to the pain and Digg's suggestion. "Oh my god, this can't be happening. This can't be happening."

"Just…" Oliver swallows, his throat suddenly dry. He holds Felicity tighter. "Just get us there as fast as you can."

Felicity lets out a desperate little whine, and it's so laced with pain that it makes his entire being ache. "Oliver…"

"I've got you," he replies. "I've got you." He shifts, and the second he does, Felicity holds him tighter, shaking her head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm not having this baby in a *van*, Oliver," she says. "I don't want my daughter born in a van! This isn't how it was supposed to go, this isn't…"

"But it is," Oliver says. With the greatest amount of grace he can manage, he slips out from behind her, helping her move until she's settled against the door. He yanks his quiver off, realizing belatedly that his bow is in there, too. Digg must have grabbed it, because

Oliver knows he dropped it when they got ambushed and he can't remember picking it back up again. He pulls his hood off, yanking his mask off before unzipping his jacket. He slips to the floor, grasping Felicity's legs, meeting her gaze. "It's okay."

"I'm scared," she whispers. "I'm really, really scared. What if…?"

"Shh," he interrupts, shifting enough that he can reach her face. He kisses her forehead, smoothing her hair back. "I've got you, okay? I won't let anything happen to either of you."

Felicity nods, her hands grasping at his shoulders. "I know. I know you won't."

"We've got this, baby," he says, dropping kisses over her heated face before pressing his forehead to hers. "We can do anything as long as we're together, right?"

"Yeah," she replies. "Yeah."

"Okay, so let's…" He takes an unsteady breath and when he takes a second to actually feel the emotions inside him, he realizes he's scared out of his goddamn mind. It threatens to take over, panic making his mind blank, but he manages to shove it down. He forces himself to focus on her. He pulls his gloves off, grasping one of her hands in his. They're both shaking. "Let's do this."

Felicity squeezes him as tightly as she can and nods.

"Let's do this."

The next fifteen minutes rush by in the blink of an eye.

Despite the contractions and the near-forced labor Felicity had been shoved into, the baby isn't ready to appear, not just yet… not until Diggle pulls up in wild squeal of the tires in front of the emergency room.

"I see her head," Oliver gasps.

"Is she okay?" Felicity asks between gritted teeth.

He chokes out a laugh despite himself. "I can't really tell from her head, honey-"

"*Oliver*!"

"But she looks *amazing* so far," he finishes.

As a small herd of doctors and nurses rush out to see what the commotion is, Oliver's aware enough of Digg to know he's looking back and seeing Oliver's Arrow gear out. Just as the door is pulled open, Digg gets it hidden, which is just when another contraction hits, revealing more of his daughter's head.

They don't have time to move Felicity into the hospital. They don't even have time to do much of anything, really, because their daughter is coming *now*.

A doctor nudges Oliver out of the way not so gently, shouting orders to a nurse for supplies and a gurney, but all he hears is his wife's pained screams and all he feels is her hands grasping for him. He takes them, wrapping himself around her, simultaneously disappointed he isn't the one who will bring their daughter into the world, and so damn grateful that he can be there for his wife.

He talks her through it - "You're doing great, baby, so great… you're amazing," to which she replies, "*I absolutely am*" - and she holds onto him for dear life as she *pushes*.

With one final push that has her nearly launching herself up off the seat, their child is born.

She's *perfect*.

"Is she okay?" Felicity asks frantically, trying to sit up. She claws at Oliver to see her and he blindly helps her, unable to tear his eyes off the newborn. "Is she…?"

The materials the doctor needs are already out there and the second a nurse clears her airway, the baby lets out an absolutely *amazing* scream of protest.

Oliver chokes out a laugh at the sound, and Felicity is quick to follow.

"Oh my god," Felicity whispers.

"Congratulations," the doctor says. The young woman doesn't look entirely like she had any real idea what she was doing, and she's both beaming like it's the best day ever and a little pale like this isn't how she saw her night going at all. Oliver can *so* relate. She holds the baby up where she's covered in a magnificent amount of goop. She's a little small, but that doesn't matter because life bursts from her tiny little

pores. "You have one heck of a strong baby girl."

They're all immediately swept out of the van.

Oliver doesn't let anyone go anywhere until he cuts the umbilical cord, and Felicity refuses to let their beautiful daughter out of her sight. The only thing that sways her is that they both need to get inside where it's warm, to get cleaned up and Felicity needs stitches. *That* gets her attention.

Somehow the next few hours pass in the blink of an eye. They both change - Felicity into a gown and Oliver into a pair of sweats that Digg finds for him. Both Felicity and baby are checked over and at some point, Diggle steps away to call everyone.

Finally, the doctors and nurses clear out and it's just *them*.

The hospital room is dark, gently lit from a lamp in the corner. The blinds are open, letting in a soft hint of moonlight, one that makes his girls *glow*.

Oliver's in bed with Felicity, both of them crowded in together on the twin mattress, huddled over the newborn cradled in his arms.

Felicity can't take her eyes off of their little girl, and Oliver can't take his eyes off of either of them. His wife runs a gentle finger down the infant's soft cheek; her hand trembles slightly, something that's only emphasized when a tear falls from her eye, soaking into the little blanket covering their girl.

"She's here," Felicity whispers. She shakes her head in wonder and Oliver leans over, kissing her temple. "I can't believe she's really here."

"I know," he replies, looking back down at the baby. He runs his hand over her head. "She's *beautiful*." Felicity nods, emotion choking her. Oliver kisses her temple again, lingering for a second, whispering against her skin, "Thank you."

She laughs, and it comes out like more of a snort than anything. "If you're thanking me for helping with the mission again…"

Oliver chuckles, shaking his head. He pulls back to look at her, but Felicity only has eyes for their daughter. "Hey," he says softly. She finally looks at him, and when he sees the happy tears in her eyes, he smiles. "Thank you for making me the luckiest person on the planet."

Felicity bites her lip, grinning at him. She leans in, cocooning their daughter between them as she kisses him. "I love you, Oliver."

"I love you," he replies.

Their next kiss lingers… until the sound of tiny pattering feet echo from out in the hallway. They both look over in time to see a tiny person suddenly fill the doorway, a well-loved stuffed elephant in her small hands. Pieces slip into place and joy floods Oliver's chest at the sight of the familiar three-year-old. He sits up a little more, nodding his head for her to come closer.

"Hey, Julie-bug," Oliver says with a grin. "Come meet your little sister."

"She's here?" the little girl asks, taking a tentative step into the room.

"She's here," Felicity confirms, her voice thick with tears. "Come over and say hi."

Digg is right behind her as the toddler makes her way over. "Sorry we were a little late," he says. He's all grins as he comes over, his eyes on the newest precious bundle. "Hit the beginning of rush hour. Sara and Lyla will be here in a few hours." He nods over his shoulder. "Your moms are getting breakfast, but they'll be here soon. Thea and Roy send their congratulations."

Oliver nods his thanks, but his eyes are fixed on little Julianna Megan Queen as she rounds the bed and stands on her tiptoes to try and see over the edge of mattress. She's staring with rapt attention at her baby sister. Before either of them can move to lift her up onto the bed with them, Diggle is right there, doing it for them with a quiet, "Hang on, munchkin."

Jules lets out a delighted little gasp, but she still doesn't say anything as she settles in on Felicity's other side. Felicity presses a kiss to her dark hair - it will be a shocking contrast to her sister's in a few years - both of their eyes on the baby.

Diggle slips out without another word, closing the door behind him.

"She's so small," Jules says softly, earning a chuckle from Felicity and a grin from Oliver…

But that's not all.

The sound of her sister's voice prompts the newborn's eyes to flutter open, making Jules' eyes widen and earning a gasp from Felicity.

Ellie looks only to her father, though.

The familiar blue of her eyes are tinted with a newborn-grey, but they're the same, a perfect echo of all those years ago. A smattering of wispy blonde curls sit atop her head and she has the same cute little nose and bow-shaped lips. He'd know this little girl in any time, at any age, in every universe. And the way she stares back at him, it leaves him feeling like just maybe she knows him, too.

Oliver's heart swells enough to fill his ribcage as he locks gazes with his baby girl.

Defying time yet again, she was born seven days earlier than her other self - May 10th instead of May 17th. It's the day she originally materialized right in front of them and changed everything in an instant, years ago. She came into their lives this time around in a very different way, but it's miraculously on the very same day.

Time has a funny sense of humor, of ways to right itself, Oliver thinks.

Or maybe that's just his daughter's doing.

He wonders about the first Ellie, the little girl who changed their lives so much all those years ago. As always, it brings a pang of longing to his heart, but that's dimmer now than it once was, offset by a tremendous gratitude for all the gifts she gave them just by virtue of being herself.

Their lives intersected for such a short time, but the impact… god the impact was tremendous. And, like his other children - like William and Jules and *this* Ellie and someday Nate - he will always love her; he will always cherish how much change and joy she brought to his life.

His Ellie will bring him all of those things too, the little girl in his arms. She's just three hours old and he already knows that. But this time is different. This *reality* is different.

This Ellie has a whole world of possibility laid out in front of her and this time, in this universe, the path she takes will be entirely up to her. But he knows beyond the shadow of any doubt that he and his wife will be there with her every step of the way, and that whatever she chooses to do with her life, it will be nothing short of remarkable.

"Hey there, Ellie-bug," Oliver whispers, brushing his thumb over her cheek. "We've been waiting for you."

Chapter End Notes

The End (of the beginning)

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